

Chillin' in Another World

WITH LV 2

SUPER CHEAT POWERS

5



Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri



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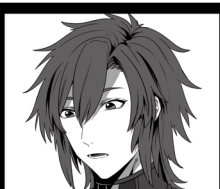
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Characters

Chillin' in Another World with Level 2
Super Cheat Powers



Flio

Former Hero Candidate and
General Store Proprietor.



Rys

Flio's wife, a lupine demon.



Wyne (Human Form)

Freeloader with high stats
and a big appetite.



Elinásze

Flio and Rys's daughter.



Garyl

Flio and Rys's son.



Sybe (Psychobear Form)

Flio's pet.



Hiya

The djinn who commands the
Origin of Light and Darkness.



Damalynas

The Grand Magus of Midnight.
In training in Hiya's mindscape.



The Maiden Queen

Hardworking queen with
a strong sense of justice.



Belano

A former witch of Klyrode. A
quiet, shy, and skittish teacher.



Blossom

A former knight of Klyrode.
Works hard on the farm.



Greanyl

Shadow demon working for the
Fli-o'-Rys General Store.

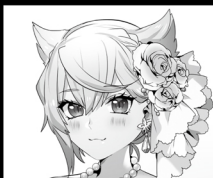
Characters

Chillin' in Another World with Level 2
Super Cheat Powers



Ghozal

Once known as the mightiest
Dark One in history.



Uliminas

Ghozal's former confederate in the
Dark Army and current wife.



Balirossa

A former knight of Klyrode and wife of
Ghozal.



Hero Gold-Hair

On the run from the law
despite being the "hero."



Tsuya

Hero Gold-Hair's
partner in crime.



Valentine

A beguiling dijan and one of
the Twelve Evil Generals.



Yuigarde

Ghozal's younger brother and
short-tempered Dark One.



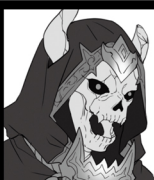
Phufun

Yuigarde's minion, a succubus,
and an extreme masochist.



Belianna

A foul-mouthed devil.



Cals'im

The hardest worker of the
Infernal Four.



Tia

Cals'im's minion,
a magic doll.



Byleri

Former archer of Klyrode
living in sin with Sleip.



Sleip (Human Form)

Former member
of the Infernal Four.

Super Cheat Powers

Chapter 1: Flio's Family

The world of Klyrode. A land of swords and sorcery, demons and demihumans. A land where humans and demons have been at war since time immemorial.

Conflict had arisen among demonkind between the Dark Army, led by the Dark One Yuigarde, and the devil Zanzibar's rebellion. However, once the Dark One himself took the field, it wasn't long before the rebels were routed. Suddenly on the offensive, the Dark Army pursued Zanzibar's surviving forces far into the desert region to the west. But they were too greedy in their pursuit, and the excursion cost the Dark Army greatly.

While the demons fought amongst themselves, the Maiden Queen, who ruled the greatest kingdom of humanity—the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode—set plans in motion to put her kingdom's affairs in order and present a strong front against the demons. But even though the demons showed no signs of attacking, she never let down her guard. She even took regular visits to the front lines of the war to assess the situation for herself.

With all the Queen's focus on domestic affairs, the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode hardly seemed to be at war at all. The days were filled with peace and prosperity.

And so the stage is set for our story...

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

Flio sat in his living room on the first floor at the large table the household typically ate their meals at. His arm outstretched, a magic circle was glowing with a pale light from his fingertips.

"To cast the spell Teleportation," he said, "first you'll need to make this magic circle. See it?" He pointed at the circle with his other hand.

The young girl Flio was teaching nodded seriously and looked intently at the circle. She was pressed as close as she could to him so as not to miss a single word of his explanation. This was Flio's daughter Elinàsze, the older of his twin children. Because her mother Rys was a demon, she had been growing up far faster than a human child.

Hiya and Damalynas were standing by the door a short distance away and were watching Flio teach his daughter about magic. Hiya

was known as the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness. They wielded magics powerful enough to destroy the world itself. After their defeat at Flio's hands, they had come to worship him, calling him the "Exalted One," and now they lived at his house. Damalynas, the Archmage of Midnight, was likewise defeated by Hiya and came to worship them in turn. She spent her time training with Hiya in the djinn's mindscape.

"The daughter of the Exalted One has a great aptitude for magic," Hiya said. "It is a pleasure to watch her train. She is truly devoted."

"Isn't she just?" Damalynas agreed. "Seeing her hard at work following Lord Flio's lessons every day... It's been making me think that *I* need to step up my *own* effort." The two were getting passionate just watching.

"Okay," Flio said. "Now you try it. Concentrate..."

"Yes, papa. Is this right?" Elinàsze held out her arm and focused her will. A pale light appeared at her fingertips.

Hiya and Damalynas leaned forward. "Incredible..." Hiya said. "Teleportation, at her age?!"

"Unbelievable..." Damalynas marveled. "It took me a hundred years to learn how to do that..."

Elinàsze continued to focus, and suddenly a vast array of magic circles began to appear behind her, popping into existence one after another. Each was about as big as the palm of her hand. They were rotating in wide circles behind her back.

It was hard to notice with all the lights, but the jewel on Elinàsze's forehead—a silver jewel she had been born with, a sign of the Goddess's blessing—had begun to shine. She kept it hidden beneath her bangs, but it was bright enough to shine through her hair. And as it grew brighter, so did the magic circles orbiting behind her.



“What?!” Hiya and Damalynas could only give wide-eyed stares.

Flio watched his daughter intently before calling up her status screen so that only he could see. It read:

Elinàsze (Child)

Lv: 5

Strength: ∞

Defense: ∞

Speed: ∞

Magic: ∞

HP: ∞

Skills: ∞

*Ability restrictions lifted due to Goddess's blessing

Flio put his hand on Elinàsze's shoulder. “Careful there!” he said. “It looks like you focused too hard and accidentally started casting the wrong spell!”

“H-Huh?” Elinàsze turned her head back to look over her shoulder. “I did?” The light in her jewel went out, and the magic circles vanished.

Just to be sure, Flio checked her status one more time and saw that her abilities had returned to normal.

Elinàsze (Child)

Lv: 5

Strength: ∞

Defense: ∞

Speed: ∞

Magic: ∞

HP: ∞

Skills: ∞

*Restrictions applied due to minor status

Flio sighed with relief. *Elinàsze's magic is unstable...* he thought. *This isn't the first time she's accidentally released her hidden power trying to cast some other spell. I have to teach her better control...* “All right, Elinàsze,” he said. “Let's take a short break and then try it again.”

“I'm fine, papa!” Elinàsze said. “I don't need a break. I can try again right now!”

“Now, now, Elinàsze,” Rys said as she stepped into the living room. “Your father said it's time for a break. Didn't you agree to do what you were told during your magic lessons?” Rys was a lupine demon and a former member of the Dark Army. After Flio had

defeated her, she chose to walk alongside him as his wife. She was the mother of Elinàsze and her twin brother Garyl.

“But papa’s so busy!” Elinàsze protested, puffing out her cheeks in a pout. “He has so little time to teach me magic!”

Rys smiled and placed a cup of tea in front of Elinàsze, and another in front of Flio. “You’re being greedy, Elinàsze,” she said. “Your father is busy with his work at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store. But I’ll be happy to help you practice magic when he’s away.”

Elinàsze took a sip of tea and looked up at Flio with pleading eyes. “I know...” she said. “But I want papa to teach me more spells...”

Flio smiled. “Actually,” he said, “I was just thinking I should spend more time teaching you.”

“R-Really?” Elinàsze asked.

Rys looked at Flio with a concerned expression. “My lord husband, are you sure? The shop keeps you so busy...”

“It’ll be fine,” Flio said. “I’ve had a lot more free time lately.”

“You...have?” Rys asked, blinking in surprise.

◇Houghtow City—The Fli-o’-Rys General Store◇

While Flio was teaching his daughter magic, another Flio was in the Fli-o’-Rys General Store, doing business with a gorilla demihuman named Khru. “In that case, sir,” he said, leading his customer to one of the weapons they had on sale, “perhaps I could interest you in this?”

“Hmm...” Khru said. “Another giant sword?”

“I believe that with your body type, Mister Khru, you might actually find a sword of this size easier to use.”

The Flio that was talking to Khru was not the usual grown-up Flio. Rather, he appeared to be a young boy. However, due to the illusion magic he was casting, most humans or demihumans would perceive him as the usual Flio. Khru didn’t suspect a thing.

Uliminas the hellcat watched the two talk as she worked. In times past, she had assisted Ghozal, the former Dark One, as his confederate. But when Ghozal quit the Dark Army, she went with him. Now she worked at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store in the guise of a demihuman. Not long ago, Ghozal had married Uliminas, along with another woman, Balirossa.

As a hellcat—one of the stronger types of demon—Uliminas was completely immune to illusion magic. She smirked as she watched Khru conversing with what she could see as a young boy, himself none the wiser.

That Flio... Can mew believe he made a magic doll of himself? But it seems like nobody meowtside the store’s staff has noticed...

Uliminas snickered to herself as she recalled what had happened a few days prior.

After closing the store one day, Flio took Ghozal and Uliminas aside to have a talk. The chief issue of discussion was Flio's increase in workload as the Fli-o'-Rys General Store continued to grow its business. Flio had to meet with customers, customize their arms and armor to their specifications, and create magic items. On top of that, he was expected to dispatch teams to fight magic beasts and the Dark Army when either encroached. There were other people working at the shop, of course, but much of the work they were getting asked for Flio by name—things only Flio could be trusted with. His daily life had become hellishly busy.

"I can help you with imbuing magic gems, at the very least," said Ghozal. Ghozal was the former Dark One; he had ceded the throne to his younger brother Yuigarde and now lived as a freeloader in Flio's house with his two wives.

"Not in a mewllion years!" Suddenly, Uliminas struck Ghozal hard on the back of his head with an oversized paper fan. It was a forceful blow, but Ghozal didn't even seem to notice. He turned nonchalantly to look at Uliminas.

"Why not?" he said. "I'm being serious."

"Refresh my mewmory..." Uliminas growled. "Who was it again who imbued a magic gem with enough power to destroy the entire city?!"

"H-Hrm," said Ghozal. "What of it?"

"Don't mew 'what of it' me! I didn't notice how much magic mew'd stuffed into that gem until after the fact, and then when I went to get it back, it had already been sold! What are mew going to do if someowne uses our purroducts for evil! It'll *ruin* meowr reputation!" Uliminas spoke in a quiet voice so as to not alert anyone in the shop, but she was glaring daggers at Ghozal.

"Hrm." Ghozal folded his arms. "Well, we'll deal with it when the time comes. Ha ha ha!"

"This is *not* a laughing meowtter!" Uliminas struck the former Dark One directly in his laughing face with her paper fan.

"Hey, hey," Flio said, smiling stiffly as he interposed himself between the two. "There's no need for that. The magic gem seems to have already been used up, and there's no indication that anyone used it for evil. That being said, I did ask Greanyl if she could track down the four who bought the gem..."

Uliminas muttered darkly, but she put her fan away and dropped the subject.

"Hrm..." Ghozal mused. "If there's nothing I can do to help, why not make a greater magic doll?"

“A magic doll?” Flio asked.

“Hrm.” Ghozal nodded. “A magic doll is an artificial clockwork creature demons know how to make. Even though they’re created by magic, they move around like living things. But the *greater* magic doll was something created by Dorn Drin-drin, the phantom mage. But all of his grimoires have been lost, and present-day demons only know how to make lesser magic dolls. A greater magic doll would make those look like toys.”

As Flio listened to Ghozal’s explanation, he scrolled through a window he had called up listing every spell he knew. One of the abilities Flio obtained when he reached Level 2 was called Epiphany. If he were ever affected by a spell he did not know, he would immediately learn every spell that has ever existed in its tradition. At this point, Flio knew not only magic practiced by humans, but also demonic magic and the magic of the Realm of Evil.

“Demonic magic,” Flio said, narrowing the search terms. “Creation magic. Magic doll.” With each term, the number of items he had to scroll through got smaller and smaller.

“I suppose it was a long shot...” Ghozal said. “No matter how good you are at magic, of course it would be impossible to rediscover how to make a greater magic doll on the spot. Only Dorn has ever been capable of using that spell. Even among demons, it’s very—”

“There it is!” Flio said. “Create Greater Magic Doll!”

“Wh-What?!” Ghozal’s eyes went wide, but Flio kept reading with his usual carefree expression.

“It looks like there’s three grades, actually,” Flio said. “Greater, Intermediate, and Lesser. Well, I suppose I’ll just try casting the spell, then.”

“H-Hrm...” Ghozal said. “I suppose...”

As Ghozal watched in shock, Flio extended his arm and summoned a truly grand magic circle. *Incredible...* Ghozal thought. *I’ve never seen a magic circle this intricate in my life!* The circle began to revolve before, slowly, a doll appeared.

When it first appeared, the doll was made of wood and had a blank face. But quickly it transformed, its texture changing to resemble flesh, and its shape becoming human. Before long, it was indistinguishable from a flesh and blood person. It looked like Flio, but it was quite a bit smaller. Younger-looking, in fact.

“Hmm...” Flio said. “This isn’t quite what I imagined...”

“B-But the spell worked, Mister Flio!” said Ghozal. “Magic dolls always look young. There was a magic doll in the Dark Citadel made by Dorn himself. *She* looked like a young girl...”

“I see...” Flio muttered. “Well, it’ll cause confusion if I leave it here looking like that, so I’ll cast an illusion to hide its body...”

Ghozal watched him work from behind, his body stiff and his eyes still wide in disbelief. *H-He created a Greater Magic Doll like it was nothing!*

Next to him, Uliminas was feeling the exact same emotions.



Yeah, yeah, Uliminas thought as she watched, back in the present, a smirk on her face. *He purrfected Create Greater Magic Doll, a spell even Ghozal, the greatest Dark One in history, couldn't cast. And now we have Minilio.*

They had started calling the magic doll Minilio to distinguish him from the usual Flio.

Well, at least with Minilio around, Flio doesn't have to spend all his time in the store. Meowll's well that ends well, or something...

"Excuse me," a customer said, snapping her out of her thoughts. "May I have this? And I also need a few magic gems for my magic lamp."

"Of course, of course! Thank mew for your purrpurchase!" Uliminas gave them a friendly smile and retrieved the box of magic gems from under the counter. Meanwhile, in the shop proper, Minilio was still helping Khru. It looked like another busy day for the Fli-o'-Rys General Store.

◇Houghtow City—In Front of Flio's House◇

While Flio was teaching his daughter magic and Minilio was tending the shop, a large man stood tall in the midst of the pasture in front of Flio's house, where the former archer Byleri tended to her horse-type magic beasts.

That man was Ghozal, freeloader and former Dark One. "Hrm," he said, facing the young boy in front of him with his arms folded. "Come at me when you're ready. From any direction."

The boy—Flio and Rys's son Garyl—cracked a grin. This was Elinàsze's brother, and like her, the demon blood in his veins was causing him to grow up much faster than most children.

"All right!" Garyl said, lowering his body in preparation. "I'll take you out in one blow this time, Uncle Ghozal!" He dashed forward, lunging at Ghozal with terrific speed.

Ghozal raised an eyebrow. "Hrm. A strong opening. But..." He turned his back to Garyl and held out his hand behind him, snatching Garyl's strike in midair. Garyl had rushed behind him in the blink of an eye to strike at his back, but Ghozal saw through the attack and blocked it.

"You're never going to hit me with *that* speed, boy," Ghozal said.

“Shut up! I’m just getting started!” Garyl drew back and kicked off the ground. He flew around to Ghozal’s front side and aimed a string of impossibly fast kicks at his face.

“Hrm! Not bad!” He lowered his stance, retreating to a guard to protect himself from Garyl’s kicks. *I may be weaker when I’m not in my demon form*, Ghozal thought, *but Garyl still managed to force me to guard! Hrm! This is getting fun!*

Ghozal grinned as he continued to block Garyl’s attacks. By this point, the spectacle had drawn a small crowd.



“That’s Lord Flio’s son for you!” said Sleip. “Lord Ghozal may not be in his demon form, but that boy is pushing him to his limits.”

Dalc Horst, in his human form, nodded. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

Sleip was once one of the Dark Army’s Infernal Four, but he quit and now lived at Flio’s house where he helped out with the stables. Although he was an old man, he and the former archer Byleri had become a married couple in all but name. Dalc Horst had been the captain of Sleip’s elite soldiers, who had left with him when he quit the Dark Army. They spent most of their time in horse form, doing jobs like pulling wagons for the store.

Byleri looked between the two, confused. “Fweh?! Like, what’s going on?! I totally can’t see anything!”

“Don’t let it bother you, Byleri,” said Balirossa. “I can’t make it out either.”

“Hwah?! Like, even you can’t?! But you’re his wife!”

At the word *wife*, Balirossa went red in the face and began to stammer. “I-I suppose I am, n-now that you mention it...”

Byleri stuck out her tongue.

Balirossa had once been a knight of Klyrode Castle, but she left her order to live with Flio. Now she too worked in the general store. She and Uliminas were both Ghozal’s wives. In fact, the wedding had only been a few days ago. Byleri herself had once been an archer, in the same company of knights as Balirossa. Now she spent her time pursuing her real passion—taking care of the horses with her partner Sleip.

“Neither of you should trouble yourself over it,” Sleip said. “I imagine that among my soldiers, only Dalc Horst can tell what’s happening.”

He wasn’t wrong. Behind Dalc Horst, the other members of Sleip’s former elite were whispering to each other, confused.

“H-Hey,” one said. “Can you see what’s happening?”

“No... Not even a little bit.”

“Even if he is the lupine Lady Rys’s son, how can he *move* like that?!”

Byleri glanced at them and then leaned forward to whisper in Balirossa’s ear. “Hey, like, Balirossa?”

“Yes, Byleri?”

“You know, the men we’ve, like, given ourselves to are both totally demons...” she said. “If we have kids, do you think it’ll be like...y’know?”

“Ghak?!” The word *kids* made Balirossa turn red up to her ears. She hadn’t been expecting that at all. “Wh-Wh-What are you saying,

Byleri?! I-I mean...I would love to bear my husband's, but—"

"Yeah..." Byleri said, blushing softly and bringing her hand to rest on her own belly. "Totally. Like, *bear children*, right? Sounds nice..."

"Y-Yes," Balirossa said, copying Byleri and placing her own hand on her belly reflexively. "I...cannot deny it."

Meanwhile, just ahead, Ghozal and Garyl were still having their match.

"Good," said Ghozal. "Good! Just like that, Garyl!"

"Grr! But you keep blocking my attacks!"

"Hah. I won't let you hit me that easily."

"Let' nothing! I'm gonna hit you!"

Garyl struck for all he was worth, grinning the whole time, while Ghozal, grinning just as much himself, kept blocking his attacks. They showed no sign of ever stopping.

◇Earlier, on the Calgosi Coast◇

Far to the south of where Flio and his crew lived was the Calgosi Coast—a long stretch of beach facing out towards the Calgosi inlet. It was governed by the countess Junia Van Biel, the current head of the noble house Van Biel. For some time now, there had been unrest in the streets of the biggest city in the region, Al-Calgosi. After all, they could hear the rumblings of cannons in the distance.

"Give me a break," Polseidon the sea dweller said, striding through the ocean as a giant and wielding a great ax. "How many times are these pirates going to attack us?!"

His ax, which was actually the black panther demihuman Rolindeim transformed into a weapon, spoke. "Hey old man," she said, giggling. "I keep telling you, you gotta handle me more gently! I may be hard as hell, but even I have my limits, you know!"

"Oh stop whining, and just fight!" Polseidon yelled at the ax.

"Treat me better and I won't whine, dummy!"

Captain Eddsarch, the captain of the pirate fleet, laughed. "Gah ha ha! They're quarreling, boys! This is our chance! Fire!"

"Aye aye, sir!" the pirate crew responded as one. At the captain's signal, they fired a volley of cannonballs at the giant arguing with his ax.

"Ngh! Oh no!" Polseidon's eyes went wide.

"Idiot!" Rolindeim hissed. "You're gonna get an earful about this later, right?"

Just then, a person appeared in front of them—Junia Van Biel, dressed as a boy. She cast a magic barrier, blocking all of the cannonballs. "No... No fighting," she said. "Please...f-focus."

"My sincere apologies, Countess!" said Polseidon.

“I’ll do better, right!” said Rolindeim.

Junia nodded.

Junia Van Biel had been wielding her magic against Captain Eddsarch’s new crew, the Neo Blackbeard Corsairs. She was visibly exhausted.

“Gah ha ha!” Eddsarch laughed lecherously, thrusting his hips at Junia in a crude pantomime. “Little Junia! Today’s the day we’re gonna capture you! I’ll do *thiis*, and *thaaat*, and then finally, finally, I will *check in* at last!”

The normally quiet Junia went beet red. “Y-You won’t!” she shouted. “This coast is under my protection! I *will* defeat you! You will *never* check in!”

“Gah ha ha! Junia’s so cute!” a pirate jeered.

“Look how red her face is!” piped in another.

“Sh-Shut up!” Junia began casting a spell.

Junia’s familiar, the rukh avian Loplanz, gritted his teeth as he watched from the beach. “C-Countess Van Biel...” he managed. “I... I have to help...”

Loplanz had been fighting along with the others, but this time Captain Eddsarch had come prepared with antiair cannons. They had focused fire on him until they knocked him out of the sky. He tried to stand, but his body was in horrible shape. It wouldn’t obey him. “At this rate, I’ll...I’ll never be stronger than Wyne. I’ll never be able to tell her I love her!”

“You called?” a familiar voice called out.

“H... Huh?!”

Looking down at him was Wyne. She was a dragonewt, and dragonewts were the strongest fighters among dragonkind. Flio and Rys had saved her when she collapsed on the road, and after that she came to live with their family. She was still growing, and had a monstrous appetite.

“W-Wyne?!” Loplanz was shocked. Wyne was squatting down next to him, not paying any particular attention to where her skirt was positioned. When the wind lifted its hem, Loplanz got a full view of the dragonewt’s nethers. “I-I— Uh!” He covered his face with his hands, trying desperately to hide how much he was blushing.

Wyne turned her attention towards the sea. “Hey,” she said. “Aren’t those the same guys from before? Can I beat ’em up again? Please?”

“Huh? I, uh... Go right ahead.”

“All right! Leave them to me!” Wyne grinned, and with a beat of her powerful wings, took to the air. Before Loplanz’s eyes, she transformed from her humanoid form into a massive wyvern. For a second, the battle stopped as everyone on the coast turned to gawk at

the wyvern that had appeared out of nowhere.

◇Later, on the Calgosi Coast◇

“Gheee...” Eddsarch whined. He and his minions were tied up on one corner of the beach, still charred black from Wyne’s dragon fire. Thanks to Junia’s spell, Bind, they were unable to get away. And even if they could somehow break free, they were exhausted to a man. They sat there, not moving a muscle.

“Well!” Polseidon said as he watched Wyne fly off. “I suppose it’s Lord Flio’s daughter Wyne to the rescue again!”

“She’s something else!” Rolindeim had returned to her usual form as a small dark-skinned girl. She giggled as she poked Eddsarch’s jiggling belly with a stick. “That one girl is enough to burn down an entire fleet!”

Junia nodded happily.

Loplanz, however, looked miserable. “I’ll never be stronger than her!” he said. “*Not only* did Wyne have to come save me, but I wasn’t even able to help out!” Suddenly, an image popped into Loplanz’s head. The image of what he had inadvertently seen when he looked up Wyne’s skirt.

Once again, he grew red. “I can’t believe she doesn’t wear anything underneath...”

◇Flio’s House◇

“I suppose that does it for today,” said Flio.

“Yes, papa,” said Elinàsze.

The two had just finished up Elinàsze’s magical study when suddenly Wyne flew in with no warning, a big smile on her face. “Hey, Eli-Eli!” she said. “Are you done studying?”

“Sis!” Elinàsze cried. “Why are you naked?!”

Just as Elinàsze said, Wyne had burst into the room wearing absolutely nothing at all.

“I got a bit too big,” she said. “My clothing got all ripped up. But that doesn’t matter! If you’re done studying, come play with me! C’mon, let’s play!” She grabbed Elinàsze’s arm, seemingly unbothered by her own nudity.

“Now, Wyne,” said Flio. “This is why you should make sure you take off your clothes before turning into a wyvern.”

“Ehe hee,” Wyne giggled. “I know. I forgot. Sorry, dada.”

Flio smirked and held out his hand. A magic circle appeared, and suddenly Wyne was wearing a new set of clothes. “There we go,” he said. “So where did you run off to, Wyne?”



“Just around,” she said. “I felt like going for a flight.”

“That’s perfectly all right, as long as you stay near the house,” said Flio. “But make sure you don’t wander too far alone.”

“I know, I know!” Wyne said with a smile and a nod.

Flio looked curious about something. He cocked his neck. “By the way...” he said.

“What is it, dada?”

“Did you make sure to put on your underwear before going out?”

Wyne hemmed and hawed, giving the matter some serious thought before concluding, “I don’t remember! Not one bit!”

In other words, Flio thought, *she once again went out without wearing underwear...* Flio understood what had happened purely from the look on Wyne’s face. He smirked. “Make sure you check to see if you’re wearing underwear next time you go out,” he told her. “If you’re wearing a skirt, people can see right up—”

“C’mon, Eli-Eli! Let’s play!” Wyne said. She wasn’t listening at all. “Is Gare-Gare done yet? Can he play too?”

“Wyne...” Flio sighed as he watched.

Rys stepped up beside him, smiling softly. “You can’t help going easy on Wyne, can you, my lord husband? I suppose I’ll have some words with her later...”

“Sorry to put this on you...” Flio said. He watched Wyne bolt out the window, smiling sardonically. *Honestly...* he thought. *When children are involved, nothing goes as planned...*

◇The Streets of Houghtow City◇

Hero Gold-Hair and his party walked down the street, trying their hardest not to stand out. They were wearing heavy hooded cloaks to disguise their faces. After all, the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode had issued a bounty for the capture of Hero Gold-Hair and his partner Tsuya, and put wanted posters across the whole kingdom.

Behind Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya followed their two new companions, Riliangiu and Valentine.

“Well, Valentine?” Hero Gold-Hair asked. “How are you doing on food—or rather, magic?”

“I am doing *wonderfully*,” said Valentine, a huge smile on her face.

Valentine had once been one of the Twelve Evil Generals from the Realm of Evil. Her body required a ridiculous amount of magic power to sustain itself in Klyrode, away from her homeworld. It was necessary for her to always seek magic energy.

She was in no position to find a valuable magic gem to gobble up, much less a living creature with powerful magic. And so, she had been getting almost all of her energy from food. But recently, the group had

had a windfall.

“With that magic gem you stumbled across, my lord, we should have no cause to worry about magic depletion for at least another few months,” Valentine said.

“Something told me I’d find a great deal on magic gems in that shop,” Hero Gold-Hair mused. “But I wasn’t expecting that gem to solve your magic problems all on its own! That thing only cost as much as your average meal! I knew coming to this city was worth the risk.”

“But it’s toooo baaad they only were selling one of those geeems...” Tsuya said, slumping her shoulders.

“Indeed.” Riliangiu folded her arms. “I’ve been watching their inventory closely, and I haven’t seen another gem on sale with so much concentrated magic power.”

“But anyway!” Hero Gold-Hair said, looking at his companions. “Me and Tsuya are wanted criminals! We shouldn’t spend too much time wandering around town. We should leave for now and come back later.”

“Yees, sir!” Tsuya gave a small curtsy. Valentine and Riliangiu both nodded.

“The Fli-o’-Rys General Store, was it...?” Hero Gold-Hair muttered to himself as they continued through the city. As they walked, he reached into his Bottomless Bag and pulled out a shovel.

◇Later, Near the Houghtow City Gates◇

Outside the city gates, Sybe the psychobear pulled along its cart, which was stuffed absolutely full of fresh vegetables. Sybe was once a wild psychobear, but one day it had a random encounter with Flio. Realizing it had no hope of victory, it surrendered and came to live with him as his family’s household pet. It spent most of its time in its unicorn rabbit form—a form Flio had given it the ability to turn into at will.

Blossom was walking alongside the psychobear as it pulled the cart. Blossom was Balirossa’s best friend, and like her, a former knight of Klyrode. The two had left the kingdom together, and now Blossom spent her time working on her farm.

“Let’s get these veggies to the store right quick!” she said. “These are merchandise!”

“Gwowl!”

After they had walked on a ways, Blossom noticed a crowd of people. “Hm?” she murmured to herself. There was a group of guards gathered by the gate, speaking urgently about something. Blossom, who passed through this gate regularly, had many friends among the guards. She decided to approach them.

“What’s up, y’all?” she asked.

“Ah! Miss Blossom! Well...here. Look at this.”

Blossom followed the guard’s gaze to find, of all things, a giant hole.

“It’s this hole,” the guard said. “It goes all the way into the city from underground. The only explanation I can think of is that somebody wanted to flee the city without being checked at the gates...”

“And in that case,” another guard added, “maybe they were...say...someone who has wanted posters all over the kingdom?”

“But we patrol the walls every hour. We would have noticed someone digging a hole this big! Or are you telling me that they dug this whole thing in less time than that?”

“Hmm...” Blossom was just as stumped as the guards. She folded her arms. *You know, she thought. Back when I was a heavy-armor knight at Klyrode Castle, I heard about a magic item that lets you dig holes super fast. But that thing should be locked up in the castle sanctuary! The Drilldozer Shovel, I think it was...*

◇Flio’s House, That Night◇

It was pitch black in the children’s room. The magic lantern had been turned off. Then, quietly, the door cracked open, and Flio and Rys stepped inside. Taking care not to make too much noise, they entered the room and walked up to the three-level bunk bed. Originally, the lowest bunk had been Garyl’s, the middle bunk Elinàsze’s, and the top bunk Wyne’s, but now all three slept together in the bottom bunk. Wyne was in the middle, with Garyl to her right and Elinàsze to her left, breathing softly and resting her head against the twins’ arms.

Rys smiled at the sight and said, “They look so comfortable.”

“Yeah,” Flio agreed, smiling as well. “They’re such good siblings.”

Flio and Rys watched the children sleep until they were satisfied, and then left the way they had come in. “I know it’s because they’re part-lupine from me,” Rys said, “but I still can’t believe they’re already starting school...”

“No kidding. It’s shocking how fast they’ve grown up. To me, at least.”

“I would have liked more time with them as babies,” Rys huffed. “Garyl started walking the very day after he was born, and Elinàsze began speaking on the third...”

Flio gave Rys his usual easygoing smile. “They seem to be growing up well, anyway.”

“They are. I suppose I must be grateful for that, at least.” Rys took Flio’s arm in her own. “I am truly lucky to have married you, my lord

husband. And I am truly lucky to be blessed with such healthy children.”

“I feel like I’m the lucky one.” They gazed into each other’s eyes as they walked along. And then, softly, they kissed, pulling away after just a second. They were still in the hallway, after all.

Blushing softly, Rys wrapped her arm back around Flio’s. “I expect our Elinàsze and Garyl might be hoping for a younger brother or sister, my lord husband. No, actually, I’m pretty sure they’ll want both. And I’m certain Wyne feels the same way.”

“Huh?!”

Rys tightened her grip on his arm as she hurried him along. “We should get started at once! Time and tide wait for no man, my lord husband!”

“Ah! I-I suppose...” As uneasy as Flio seemed about the prospect, he nodded in agreement, and the two of them vanished inside their bedroom.

No sooner was Flio’s door closed than the door to the neighboring room quietly opened. Ghozal, Balirossa, and Uliminas poked their heads out, all dressed in their nightclothes.

“Having kids hasn’t made those two one bit less lovey-dovey...” Ghozal said.

“Yes, quite so...” said Balirossa, pressing her body close to Ghozal’s. “B-But we have become quite ‘lovey-dovey’ as well, as you say...”

“Mew said it, Balirossa.” Uliminas pressed up against Ghozal from the other side. She wrapped her arms around Ghozal’s left arm while Balirossa took his right.

The door to Ghozal’s room swung lazily shut. Inside, the sound of three bodies impacting a bed could be heard.

Not long after, Hiya and Damalynas appeared in the hallway by teleportation. They crept up to Flio’s room, pressing their ears against the door.

“It’s no good, Your Divinity...” Damalynas whispered. “I can’t hear anything...”

“I should have known,” Hiya whispered back. “The Exalted One is skilled enough to conceal his presence with magic even when engaging in intercourse with his wife. The room seems to be warded against clairvoyance as well.”

The pair moved to Ghozal’s door, every bit as stealthy as before, and once again pressed their ears against it.

“I can’t hear anything here either...” Damalynas muttered.

“I should have known,” Hiya said. “The strongest of the demon royals is canny enough to use concealment magic even while taking two partners at once...”

The two shared a disappointed look.

“What do we do, Your Divinity?” Damalynas asked. “We could study how Lord Sleip and Lady Byleri have sex in their room at the stables...”

“No,” said Hiya. “This has been enough for today.” They wrapped an arm around Damalynas’s shoulder, pulling her into a gentle hug. “Shall we return to my mindscape and review our previous training with Maglion?”

Damalynas broke out in a giddy smile. “Y-Yes! Gladly!”

As the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness, Hiya was capable of manifesting whatever sexual organs they wished. They had already changed their genitals to a man’s in advance of their training. “Then let us be off.”

“Yes!”

Hiya vanished to their mindscape, Damalynas held close in their arms.

After Hiya and Damalynas left, two more doors creaked open. One was Blossom’s, and the other was Belano’s. They glanced at each other.

“Goodness gracious!” Blossom said. “Everyone in this house sure seems to be getting along, huh?”

Belano nodded.

“Hey Belano. How ’bout the two of us single gals get a drink together?”

Belano shook her head. “I have to...get ready for work...”

“Ah, of course. I suppose that’s that, then. I won’t push ya.”

Belano nodded again and closed her door, returning to her room.

“No luck, huh?” Blossom grimaced to herself. “I suppose I’ll be drinking by my lonesome, then...” she said as she made her way downstairs.

◇Flio’s House, The Following Morning◇

Flio and Rys slept peacefully, naked in the big bed in their room, their nightwear scattered around them. Rys was resting her head on Flio’s shoulder, safe in his arms.

The first rays of sunlight began to filter in through the gaps in the curtains, making Flio slowly blink his eyes open. He could hear someone running in the hallway.

Rys’s ears perked up at the sound. “M-My lord husband! This presence!” She kicked the covers off, quickly retrieving the clothes she had unceremoniously tossed aside in last night’s haste.

Seconds later, they could hear the door to their chambers fly open with a loud *bang*. And then their bedroom door followed suit.

Standing there were Wyne and Garyl.

“Papa, the sun’s out!” said Garyl. “I wanna train!”

“C’mon, let’s play!” said Wyne.

“No, Wyne! I don’t wanna play, I wanna *train*!”

“Oh! In that case, c’mon, let’s train!”

Flio and Rys smirked as they looked down at their children. They had gotten their clothing on just seconds before the two had burst into their room—though there hadn’t been time to put on any underwear.

“All right, all right!” said Flio. “I’ll head to the pasture in just a bit. You two go on ahead.”

“Okay!” said Garyl.

“Yay! Let’s go play!” said Wyne.

“I told you, Wyne! We’re not playing!”

“Oh, right!”

The two left just as noisily as they had arrived. “My lord husband...” said Rys. “Perhaps from now on it would be best to put our nightclothes back on before we sleep...”

“It might be,” Flio said. “I have a feeling it’s going to be like this every morning from now on.”

The two shared a look.

“Good morning, by the way, Rys,” said Flio.

“Good morning, my lord husband,” said Rys.

The two kissed. Their awakening had been a bit more chaotic than usual, but they always made sure to exchange their usual morning greetings.

Chapter 2: The Maiden Queen's Day Off

◇Klyrode Castle—Throne Room◇

It was late into the morning, and the various dignitaries had gathered in the throne room for their regular meeting. The palace ministers were here, of course, and so were captains from the front lines and their representatives.

"Knight Captain MacTaulo," the Maiden Queen said. "Has the Dark Army made no movement to reclaim their surrendered outpost?"

"No, Your Majesty," MacTaulo answered. "We fortified our position expecting an enemy attack, but our scouts have seen no sign of any Dark Army activity at all."

The Maiden Queen breathed a sigh of relief even as she lowered her head in thought. "It's strange," she said to herself. "It hasn't been only the knight captain's position. For quite some time now, the Dark Army has not made a single proper attack."

The Queen's comments set the room abuzz. "It is strange," one person said in agreement.

"There used to be an attack at some fortress or other two or three times a week..." another added.

"It's unsettling. I wonder what could be causing it..." mused a third.

Here, the chief spymaster raised her hand. "I believe I may have some information," she said. "We still don't know the details, but it seems that a group of demons, led by a devil named Zanzibar, rebelled against the Dark One. It seems that the Dark One Yuigarde is devoting all of his attention to killing Zanzibar."

"I thought the uprising had already been suppressed..." the Maiden Queen mused.

"Not exactly," said the spymaster. "Zanzibar fled to the desert in the west. The Dark One has been obsessed with pursuing him."

"He pursued him into the desert?!" The Maiden Queen hadn't expected that. *The western desert covers more land than the whole of the Magical Kingdom!* she thought. *It would take an enormous amount of time and resources to track down someone who had fled there! The supply chains you would need! The communication networks! How in the world...?!*

The news may have distressed Her Majesty the Queen, but the atmosphere in the throne room had become much more relaxed. People began to chatter, their voices jovial and cheerful.

"I guess that bastard Yuigarde is just as bullheaded as they say!"

"The sheer folly! Imagine sending an army into the desert just to finish off a rebellion!"

"If we attack now, wouldn't it be relatively easy to take the Dark Citadel?"

"Silence," the Maiden Queen commanded. Her subjects heeded. For a second, the room was quiet.

"Listen to me, everyone," the Queen went on. "We must approach this situation with utmost caution. Perhaps the Dark One Yuigarde has led his army on a foolhardy expedition to the desert, but if he succeeds, it is sure to raise his army's morale. They may come to attack us with force again. There is no guarantee this attack will be repelled as easily as the last was."

The Queen took to her feet and surveyed the room. "Here is my proposition: we keep a calm head in this turbulent situation and focus on strengthening our ability to resist the Dark Army. Our supply lines are a particular concern. If you have any concerns, no matter how small, please inform me at once. Remember, our utmost duty is to protect the people of this land. I will be counting on all of you."

"Yes, Your Majesty!" The assembled dignitaries all bowed before the Queen.

Her Majesty holds the people first in her heart, no matter the circumstances... MacTaulo marveled, head bowed. And she charts our course forward with utmost care. Truly, we are blessed to have her as Queen! The old King had so little interest in strategy meetings that he would nap through them as often as not. And that's to say nothing of his appropriating the kingdom's resources for his own selfish purposes! He used our very own supply teams to operate his illegal black market side business! It caused no end of trouble for us on the front lines...

◇Meanwhile, Deep in a Cave in West Houghtow◇

"Ahhh-kachooey!" the Shadow King sneezed.

"Ew! Gross!" yipped Kintsuno the Gold.

"I got the Shadow King's snot all over me!" Gintsuno the Silver complained.

"Well, excuse me for needing to sneeze," the Shadow King said, rubbing his nose. "Someone must have been talking about me."

The Shadow King was flanked by his two lackeys, the cheongsam-wearing fox demons Kintsuno the Gold and Gintsuno the Silver, who were currently in their demonic forms. He himself was dressed in the same gaudy manner as he had been when he was King of Klyrode.

Before them were the devils Zanzibar and Meiden.

“That would hardly be a surprise. I expect people talk about the former King of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode all the time.” Zanzibar took a drink from the glass of liquor in his hand, draining it dry. “But I have to thank you. If it had not been for your intervention, we would not have escaped from Yuigarde so easily.”

“Don’t worry about it!” said Kintsuno.

“Us demon fox sisters used to rule in the west,” Gintsuno added. “The desert is practically our back yard. Avoiding that imbecile of a Dark One wasn’t difficult at all.” The two foxes snickered to each other in unison.

“And so it goes,” the Shadow King said. “I say we keep you out of Yuigarde’s sight and keep looking for isolated and weakened units from the Dark Army that we can defeat. We’re in this together, I suppose...so long as you keep paying for our informants and our sundry expenses as refugees.” He placed a cigar in his mouth. Gintsuno snapped her fingers to light it, much to the Shadow King’s delight.

Geh heh heh! the Shadow King thought. I didn’t know what to think when we happened upon that group in the desert, but they were acquaintances of the fox sisters, apparently, so we took them in. And now we’re making money hand over fist! We can keep this up until Yuigarde withdraws, so we should get as much as we can from them in the meanwhile...

Meiden poured Zanzibar another drink, and he drained that too. *Ha ha ha... he thought. I didn’t know what to think when we happened upon that group in the desert, but it turned out to be the demon fox sisters—someone familiar with the region! I couldn’t imagine better luck. That damned human is bleeding us dry with his rates, but...well...we only need to stay here till Yuigarde gives up. And then I’ll invite the demon fox sisters to join us and kill the Shadow King!*

◇The Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

At around the same time, the luminaries of the Dark Army were gathered in the throne room for their own regular meeting. There was the lamia Yorminyt the Serpent Princess, the doppeladler Hugi-Mugi, and the skeleton Calsi’im—the three remaining members of the Infernal Four. The lichsteed Sleip had been driven away, and due to their recent difficulties finding recruits, the fourth seat had yet to be filled. Many demons were eyeing it with great interest, not least the devil Belianna.

As for the Dark One Yuigarde, he was nowhere to be seen.

“Phufun,” Yorminyt hissed, flicking her snakelike tongue. “What is the meaning of thisss? It hasss been a long time sssince the Dark One

went wessst to finish off the rebellion, yet there is ssstill no word? He even took sssoldiers from other divisionsss along with him. For once, would you jusst explain what is happening?"

Phufun, Yuigarde's minion, stood next to his empty throne, regarding Yorminyt with a cool expression. *Don't panic*, she told herself. *With the Dark One gone, unrest in the Dark Citadel grows by the day. What I say here will have an effect on the whole army's morale.*

Phufun sighed. "First, I want to apologize on the Dark One's behalf for, as you say, taking soldiers from other divisions. But Master Yuigarde is busy directing his soldiers on the front lines. I can only hope that the lack of word is a sign that his campaign against the rebels is going well."

"Meaning," Yorminyt said, "that the Dark One Yuigarde is ssstill in the desssert pursssuig Zanzibar?"

"You may take it that way if you wish." Phufun pressed her false glasses up the bridge of her nose.

Yorminyt heaved a heavy sigh. "But there's sssomething peculiar here," she said. "My subordinatesss, who were taken by Yuigarde for his quessst, reported to me that far from battling Zanzibar'sss rebellion, our army is wandering in circlesss, unable to even find them."

Phufun fell silent.

"And another thing," Yorminyt continued, fixing Phufun with a glare like ice. "My subordinatesss alssso tell me that our sssupply lines have been sssevered by the rebelsss. They ss say they have been unable to obtain even basic food or weaponsss."

Phufun met Yorminyt's glare, but beads of nervous sweat were starting to form on her forehead, and her rate of glasses adjustments per second began to unconsciously increase. "I...have received no such reports," she said.

"That'sss why I'm *telling* you!" Yorminyt snapped. "In which casse, *why* musst I wait for his *permisssion* to take to the field?"

"That is..." Phufun started. "The Dark One's wish was for the Infernal Four to stay in the Dark Citadel when he was away, in case we were to come under attack..."

"Oh, iss that ssso? Or are you trying to hide from usss how bad the frontline conditionsss are?"

Once again, Phufun was at a loss for words. Yorminyt had hit the nail directly on the head. There was *some* truth to what Phufun said. The time Zanzibar's rebellion had invaded the Dark Citadel while the army was away had put her on guard. But putting aside Calsi'im, who was too old to fight and really just an official, there was no explanation for why neither Yorminyt nor Hugi-Mugi had been sent out.

Yorminyt and Phufun glared daggers at each other until Calsi'im, wearing elaborate robes and carrying a staff, interposed himself between the two. "Now, now, you two!" he said, turning his eyes from one to the other—not that he actually had eyes in his sockets. "We are all servants of the Dark One Yuigarde! We mustn't fight amongst ourselves! Now, why don't we take this intelligence Yorminyt has brought us with the information Phufun has, and together we can figure out how to rethink our strategy. I'm afraid that at my age, offering my counsel is about all I can do, you know."

As he spoke, Calsi'im's minion Tia handed out cups of tea to all of the participants in the strategy meeting, including Phufun, Yorminyt, and Hugi-Mugi.

Yorminyt took a long sip. "Hissss... I haven't quite sssaid my piece, but you *are* a fellow Infernal, Calsssi'im. And thisss tea is delicioussss. Very well. I will have my information written up as a report." So saying, she left the throne room.

Phufun breathed a sigh of relief to see Yorminyt leave. *How are we going to get out of this one...?* she wondered, idly bringing her cup of tea to her mouth and taking a sip. "My!" she said. "This tea is quite good!"

"I should hope so," Tia said, looking somewhat upset as she collected the empty tea cups. "As Calsi'im's minion, I have devoted my very soul to making this tea. If it were not for Calsi'im's orders, I would never let anyone but him drink it."

But there was no denying that the tea had calmed the assembly considerably and possibly even headed off Phufun and Yorminyt coming to blows in the throne room. "Now, now, Tia," said Calsi'im. "When we go back to my chambers, you can make a cup of tea just for me."

"Thank you!" Tia cried for joy. "How I have longed to hear those words!"

Thank the darkness for Calsi'im and Tia, I guess... Phufun thought.



"Are we an army, or are we a damned tea party...?" the devil Belianna grumbled discontentedly to herself as she watched the proceedings in the throne room. "I don't care if it's the damned rebels or the damned humans. Just give us the damned order to attack someone already!" She tensed the hand that was holding her giant scythe slung over her shoulder.

Belianna was angry for a reason. Desperate to achieve some meritorious deed that would raise her to the rank of Infernal, she and her soldiers had attacked a human position without notice or permission, only to be unceremoniously captured without even

putting up a fight. Phufun had confined her to the Dark Citadel as punishment for her two offenses of attacking without permission and losing the fight.

I thought they might give us permission to attack if the damned meeting went well, but this is no damned fun at all, she thought, grinding her teeth as she left the throne room. If nothing changes, I won't have a damned chance to prove myself!

As she walked, she recalled the image of the human who had stopped her, a man wearing a wolf mask. *I'll show you! she thought. I'm nothing like Zanzibar, that damned disgrace to devil-kind! I will achieve a damned great victory and be made a member of the damned Infernal Four. And I will defeat that damned vexatious Wolf of Justice!*

The Wolf of Justice, by the way, was Flio wearing a wolf mask to hide his identity, but Belianna had no way of knowing that.

◇Klyrode Castle—The Maiden Queen's Chambers◇

The Maiden Queen, duties finished, had returned to her chambers for the day. With her was Boralis, the captain of the Queen's personal guard.

"And you wish to go in disguise, Your Majesty?" Boralis said.

The Maiden Queen nodded. "Yes," she said. "I may have no better chance to see the true state of my kingdom than now, with the Dark Army in disarray. I wish to see it with my own eyes, not as Queen, but in disguise as a commoner."

"I understand Your Majesty's wish," Boralis said. "But if you are in disguise, we, your royal guard, will be unable to accompany you..."

"That is true. Your face is known to the people, Boralis, as are the faces of the other women in my guard. After all, you have accompanied me on many official functions in all corners of the land."

Boralis folded her arms and thought about it before continuing. "What we need is someone strong enough to protect Your Majesty who won't arouse suspicion..."

"Yes, I quite agree," said the Queen. "Perhaps we can travel as part of a large household. That would not be strange."

"Then we are looking for a large household of skilled fighters who would not be averse to you joining them. Can you think of anyone, Your Majesty?" Boralis frowned, deep in thought, but the Maiden Queen smiled.

"Whatever do you mean?" she asked. "I know of a perfect household. I believe you are familiar with them as well, Boralis."

"I am?" Boralis stared blankly. The Queen just grinned.

◇Days Later, at Flio's House◇

Boralis had sent a message to Flio, explaining the situation and asking him when would be a convenient time for her to visit. She had agreed to come to Flio's house in the evening after they had closed the shop.

Now she was speaking to him in the house's parlor.

"So," Flio said, "you want us to protect Her Majesty while she travels in secret around the kingdom?"

"Yes. The Dark Army is too busy with its internal discord to launch an attack against the Magical Kingdom, and Her Majesty would like to take the opportunity to see the kingdom for herself. It seems very important to her."

Flio gave it some thought. "Just to get this straight, you want us all to travel to various places in the kingdom, along with the Queen?"

"Exactly," said Boralis. "We will arrange for housing on your trip and pay for any expenses you might incur. You can think of it as a free vacation, perhaps. We would be very grateful for your help..." Boralis bowed her head.

As the captain of the Maiden Queen's royal guard, Boralis had had many opportunities to learn just how extraordinary Flio was. He had defeated Hiya, the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness, and claimed them for his own. And then Hiya, it seemed, went on to defeat Damalynas, the Grand Magus of Midnight. And now the Fli-o'-Rys General Store was helping with supplies for human armies, making deliveries to seemingly impossible locations. She had every reason to trust Flio. In fact, she was so overawed by Flio that she had completely forgotten he had a family.

The Maiden Queen had proposed the idea of traveling under the guise of a member of Flio's household, and Boralis immediately agreed. If Lord Flio were there, she would have no objections.

"May I ask my family for their opinion?" Flio asked.

"Of course you may," Boralis said. "Only...I ask that you please keep it a secret that the one traveling with you is the Maiden Queen herself."

"All right," Flio said. "I'll take care."

Flio and Boralis left the parlor and headed for the living room of the main house. It was nearly dinnertime, and at a word from Flio, the family was all gathered.

"And so," he said, finishing up his explanation, "Miss Boralis and her sister would like us to protect them as they inspect the Magical Kingdom."

"My lord husband," said Rys, who could tell that something was suspicious. "Why must our whole family come along?"

Flio smiled. "Well you see," he said, "in addition to inspecting the kingdom, they also wish to thank us for all of the orders the Fli-o'-Rys

General Store has filled for the castle. Isn't that right, Miss Boralis?"

"Yes, quite right," said Boralis, following Flio's lead. "We will pay any travel expenses you incur on the road. We hope it will be like a family vacation."

"Does that mean we can go with you, papa?" Elinàsze asked.

"Yes it does," said Flio. "We'll all travel around the Magical Kingdom together."

Elinàsze's face lit up and she sprung to her feet. "I want to go! Please, papa, may I? You never take me on your trips!"

Flio had said "we'll all," but Elinàsze, who loved her father dearly, had apparently missed that part. She clasped her hands together in front of her chest and stared dreamily off into space.

"I get to go with papa!" Elinàsze exclaimed. "Oh, how wonderful!"

Well, as long as she's happy, I suppose, Flio thought, smiling in wry amusement.

"Hey, hey, dada!" said Wyne. "Do vacations taste good?"

"Taste good?" Flio repeated. "Well, I suppose you can find good-tasting things *on* vacations..."

"Then I wanna go! I wanna go! Please?" Wyne had already started to drool.

"A chance to see the land..." Hiya said. "It sounds like it may be fruitful."

"I've always kinda wanted to try staying at an inn, Your Divinity," Damalynas added.

I should place Subjugation on those two to make sure they don't peep in any of the other guests' rooms... Flio thought.

"Hrm," said Ghozal. "We haven't had a chance to go anywhere since we got married. Whaddaya say, Uliminas? Balirossa?"

"Meow?!" Uliminas started. "W-W-Well, if mew *insist*, I suppose I *wouldn't mind...*"

"Th-Then, would this be our honeymoon?" asked Balirossa. "P-Personally, I would very much like to go."

Ghozal nodded. "Hrm. It sounds like we're coming with you, Mister Flio."

"Like, my lord?" Byleri said to her partner Sleip. "What do you wanna do?"

"Me? Of course I want to go! Anything to put a smile on your face, Byleri."

"Ehee... Oh my gosh." Byleri blushed. "Like, thank you so much, my lord! Lord Flio! We're totally coming too!"

"Yes," said Sleip. "We're in your care."

The idea of a trip had caught on right away. While everyone was cheering and talking giddily, Garyl walked up to Flio and Boralis.

"Um..." he said. "Is the nice lady gonna come too?"

“The nice lady?” Boralis asked.

“You know, the pretty lady who came to our house that one time...”

Flio and Boralis exchanged a look. Garyl must have been talking about the Maiden Queen, who had come by recently, rushing to offer her belated congratulations on the birth of Flio and Rys’s children.

Flio leaned forward to whisper in his son’s ear. “You have to keep this a secret,” he said, “but yes. She is.”

“R-Really?!”

“Yes. But right now, it’s a secret to everyone but me and you.”

“Okay! I promise, dad! I won’t tell *anyone*!” Garyl said. He did his best to keep his voice down, but he had a big cheerful grin on his face.

He’s very taken with the Queen, our Garyl, Flio thought, smiling down at Garyl’s innocent face.

And so it was arranged. Boralis was to set out on an inspection of the country, accompanied by most of Flio’s household. But secretly, it was not Boralis, but the Maiden Queen for whom this was being arranged. Flio’s living room was full of excited conversation.

Boralis watched the crowd, lost in thought. *The former Dark One and his confederate... A former Infernal, and Flio’s wife, who could match an Infernal easily... And then there’s the djinn and the Grand Magus of Midnight! If Flio’s household decided to conquer the world, there isn’t much we could do to stop them...*

◇Later Still—In Front of Flio’s House◇

Flio’s household was lined up in front of the house, each carrying their own luggage. In front of them were two women, dressed in casual clothes, who had just arrived by carriage.

“I thank you humbly,” Boralis said, bowing deeply. “I am in your hands for these coming days.”

The Maiden Queen, in disguise, bowed alongside her. “Thank you for taking care of my sister and me,” she said. The plan was for her to pretend to be Boralis’s younger sister for the duration of the trip, and to travel under the name Ellie. The adults of Flio’s house had been privately informed of her real identity.

Garyl ran up to the Maiden Queen. “Miss Ellie!” he said, smiling brightly. “I can’t believe I get to see you again!”

“It’s very nice to see you as well, Garyl!” Ellie smiled back. *I know it’s his mixed parentage, but I can’t believe how fast this boy is growing!* she thought. *He’s more than a full size bigger than he was the other day. And much stronger-looking, as well...*

Ellie stared at Garyl’s face somewhat longer than she had intended, marveling at his lightning-fast development.

“Hm?” Garyl said. “Is something on my face?”

“Hm?”

“You’re staring at me...”

“Oh! I’m so sorry! That wasn’t my intention at all!” Ellie’s face flushed red. She shook her head to clear it. The rest of Flio’s family watched the exchange fondly.

“Well then,” said Flio. “Shall we be off? We’re visiting the towns near the northern fortress today, if I’m not mistaken. And after that, how about we visit the Kinosaki Hot Springs Village?”

“That sounds like a good plan,” Boralis said.

“All right...” Flio held out his hand, and a great magic circle appeared. A large door appeared from it—a portal. Flio opened the door, and on the other side was a fortress. It would have taken them more than a month to travel this far north by carriage, but with Flio’s magic, they were there in a single second.

Teleportation was a spell that allowed the caster to instantly travel to any location they had been to previously. Flio, whose business with the Magical Kingdom had taken him to towns and cities all across the land, and even to the various fortresses on the front line of the war, could travel almost anywhere in the region in the blink of an eye.

“Let’s go,” Flio said. Ghozal took the lead as the group walked through the door. Somewhere along the way, Garyl began walking in front of Ellie, holding her hand like he was leading her along. Flio, meanwhile, was followed by Rys on his right side and Elinàsze on his left.

“We’re off!” Flio said, turning to Blossom, Belano, and Sybe, who were waving from the front entrance. “Thank you for looking after the house while we’re gone!”

The three of them were too busy to come with the rest. Blossom and Sybe had farmwork to do, and Belano had her job at the Houghtow College of Magic.

“Roger!” Blossom said. “Leave the house to us! Lord Flio, you just enjoy your vacation, all right?”

Belano nodded silently, and Sybe gave a cheerful “Gwor!”

“Thank you,” said Flio. “We’ll see you when we get back!” And then, giving them his usual carefree smile, he vanished through the portal. As the door closed, the portal vanished.

“I guess Sybe and I are gonna go work the farm,” Blossom said. “You headin’ to school, Belano?”

Belano nodded.

“All right! Take care, you hear?”

“You too...”

The three went their separate ways—Blossom and Sybe headed to the farm, and Belano to the school.

The Dark One Yuigarde's army had fallen into chaos. Yuigarde had led them deep into the desert after Zanzibar's rebels, moving based on nothing more than his intuition. Meanwhile, having gained the demon fox sisters as allies, Zanzibar's remaining forces were making life hell for Yuigarde.

"Where the hell can that blasted Zanzibar *be*?!" Yuigarde demanded. He was at the very front of the army, grumbling angrily. Before him was an endless expanse of sand. "He must be *somewhere* in this godsdamned desert!"

As the Dark One stamped his feet like a child, one of his soldiers came up to him. "Dark One... Do you still intend to pursue him further into the desert?"

"Hah?" Yuigarde yelled. "What kind of question is that?! Of course I am! I won't rest until every last rebel is dead!"

"But...our provisions of food are—"

"Hah?! Phufun sent some supplies the other day!"

"But," the soldier protested, "our supply lines are stretched long and thin over the desert. And it seems like they've been harried by the rebels! We haven't had a delivery in a week."

"What did you say?!" Yuigarde shouted, clearly taken aback. "Damn that Zanzibar to hell! He knows he can't win in a fair fight, so now he's cheating!"

"Yes, Dark One. Perhaps we should withdraw for the time—"

"Hah?! What the hell are you on about?! 'Withdraw'?! If our supply lines are under attack, that means that Zanzibar is near! You want us to throw away our chance?!"

"B-But...Dark One! We don't know if it's Zanzibar leading those attacks!"

"I *know* Zanzibar's behind it!" Yuigarde declared. "Are you doubting my words, punk?!"

"N-No! Perish the thought!"

"Then let's go! Show me where our supply lines are under attack!"

"Y-Yes, Dark One!" The demon ran off, thoroughly rebuked. Yuigarde followed after him, running haphazardly through the sands.

"Hey," one of the demons watching whispered to his fellows. "That isn't how the Dark One is supposed to act, is it?"

"He just *knows*, he says?" another added.

"Can't even do proper scouting..."

"When Lord Gholl was Dark One, the Silent Listeners would have handled it..."

"If the supply lines keep getting attacked, pretty soon we'll be out of provisions..."

“If only Lady Uliminas was still here... *She’d* know what to do...”

“He’s a terrible Dark One.”

“It’s the end of the Dark Army...”

Their whispered voices vanished in the desert wind. Yuigarde didn’t hear so much as a peep.

◇The Magical Kingdom of Klyrode—Northern Stronghold◇

With Flio’s expedient Teleportation spell, Ellie and Boralis were able to visit a good number of fortresses over the course of the day. Flio also cast the spell Void Presence on Ellie—that is to say, the Maiden Queen—hiding her presence from all who would notice. All except for Knight Captain MacTaulo, the commander of the position he had once wrested from Sleip, who saw that she was here. But, perhaps intuiting her intentions, he gave no indication that he had noticed anything amiss.

Sleip approached his former adversary. “Knight Captain MacTaulo...”

“You...” MacTaulo said. “Sir Sleip, is it?” Once, these two men had faced off against each other in this land—Sleip in this outpost, and MacTaulo in the stronghold behind them. “To think the day would come that the two of us could speak as friends.”

“Yes,” Sleip said with a nod. “It is extraordinary.” The two men shook hands.

“You were quite the formidable adversary,” MacTaulo said. “I couldn’t utter a word to my subordinates, of course, but there were many times that I despaired of victory. Not that I ever had any intention of losing to you.”

“Nonetheless, it is quite an honor to hear you say so. You were the champion of humankind, after all.”

The two kept on talking, grinning like they had been friends for years. Byleri, who was watching from the sidelines, smiled at the sight.

“Allow me to introduce you to someone,” Sleip said, beckoning Byleri forward. “This is Byleri. We...live together. Think of her as my wife.”

“Like, hi!” Byleri said. “I, like, used to be in Klyrode’s army, y’know! I’ve totally heard all kinds of stories about you!”

“Oh, I see!” said MacTaulo. “So you’ve taken a wife, have you? I must say, I’m a little envious you’ve found such a lovely lady!”

“Well now!” Sleip remarked. “The legendary Knight Captain MacTaulo is still single?”

“As much as it pains me, I don’t have any time to meet people between all the battles.”

“I understand that well. Meeting Byleri was one of the benefits of

quitting the Dark Army.”

Flio watched with his usual carefree smile as Byleri joined the two veterans in their conversation. *Seeing two old enemies like MacTaulo and Sleip getting along so well really makes everything feel worth it*, he thought. Flio had once been here before, wearing his wolf mask under the guise of the Wolf of Justice, where he had halted the Dark Army’s attack. He had taken the demons alive and had sent them back along with the message: “We wish for peace.”

As Flio reminisced about his old exploits, Rys nuzzled softly up to him. “Those three seem to be in good spirits, my lord husband.”

“They do, don’t they?”

“This is all thanks to you, you know,” Rys said.

“Well, I like to think I helped,” said Flio, smiling happily at his wife’s words. *One day*, he thought, *I hope humans and demons will all live in peace like this.*

◇ A Few Hours Later—Kinosaki Hot Springs Village ◇

After they finished inspecting fortresses, Flio teleported the group to the Kinosaki Hot Springs Village in the north of the Magical Kingdom, famous for its hot springs not only in the kingdom itself but in surrounding lands as well. It was well known enough to see a steady stream of visitors even despite the ongoing war with the Dark Army.

Ellie’s eyes sparkled as she walked down the main street. “I had heard about this place, but I never imagined it was so grand!” she exclaimed. *This town isn’t as big as the Klyrode Castle Town but there are at least as many people walking on the streets. Kinosaki must be quite a significant city for the region...*

Flio was walking alongside her, fondly watching her take in the scenery. “It was a surprise for me too, the first time we came here,” he said. “People visit from all over—even well outside the region.”

“For the hot springs, I take it?” Ellie asked. “Fascinating...”

Flio nodded. “Miss Ellie, is this your first time visiting hot springs?”

“It is. I’ve heard about them of course, but I’ve never had the opportunity...”

“In that case, take all the time you like in the baths tonight. I can’t go in with you, but Ser Boralis and Rys can accompany you.”

Ellie smiled. “Of course! I believe I will do just that.”

Elinàsze, who was walking hand in hand alongside her father, looked up at him. “Papa, may I take a bath with you today?”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” Flio said. “It won’t just be us this time. The baths here are ones you take with lots of other people. I’m afraid

we'll be in separate baths."

"Okay..." Elinàsze pouted. "If you say so, papa..."

Ellie smiled down at the girl. "You love your father very much, don't you, Elinàsze?" she said. "I hope you're not too lonely without him."

"I do!" Elinàsze said, beaming back. "I love my papa! I love washing his back, and I love it when he washes my hair in return!"

Hold on... Ellie thought. *If Lord Flio and Elinàsze take their baths together, that must mean that they bathe as a family. Then, does that mean Rys and Garyl...* She turned to look at Rys. She was an attractive woman, slender and busty—hardly someone who looked like she had given birth to twins. Many of the men passing by on the street turned to get a second glance at her as she passed.

Ellie wished the men were paying as much attention to *her*.

She was by no means fat, but her chest was smaller than average and her hips were nothing special. The attention Rys received only served to remind her of the shortcomings of her own body. *I can't let Garyl see me like this! Not when he's used to seeing such a beautiful woman every day...* She sighed. *Wait! What am I thinking?! H-He's still a child! Of course, he's a splendid and honest boy with great things ahead of him, but—*

"What's wrong, Miss Ellie?" Garyl asked.

"Eeaghhh?!" Ellie, who had absolutely not been expecting Garyl to speak to her at that moment, chomped down on her tongue.

Garyl looked up at her, confused. "I was just... You were blushing and looking all gloomy... I thought maybe something was wrong..."

"N-No! Nothing at all is the matter! I'm terribly sorry to have worried you!" Ellie said, hiding her mouth behind her hand as she desperately tried to keep anyone from noticing her injured tongue.

"Well, if you say so!" Garyl said, grinning cheerfully at her. "We came here to have fun! I want you to have fun too, Miss Ellie!"

Garyl's innocent smile only made Ellie blush even more furiously.

As the Maiden Queen, she devoted every waking moment to her kingdom, in both her studies and her daily habits. She had no experience whatsoever with love.



A woman hid behind a building and watched Flio, Ellie, and the rest as they strolled down the street chatting happily.

That damned woman... she thought. *She's had Void Presence cast on her, but there's no mistake—that's the damned Maiden Queen of the damned Magical Kingdom of Klyrode! What is she doing here...?*

Belianna the aspiring Infernal licked her lips as she kept an eye on Ellie. Devils were particularly good at magic that obscured or

concealed a person's presence, and had a high resistance to such magic as well—high enough that she could perceive Ellie.

I infiltrated the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, she thought, against my damned orders no less, so that I could cause enough damned chaos in a major city to earn the merit I need to be made one of the damned Infernal Four...but I seem to have stumbled into something much damn bigger. If I can take her down, they'll beg me to be an Infernal!

Disguised as a human, her own presence hidden by the spell Concealment, Belianna crept along behind Ellie's party.



The Kinosaki Hot Springs Village had seven outside baths, each with their own medicinal properties. The group made their way to one of them, wanting to get in the hot springs as soon as possible.

Blub blub blub blub blub...

In the women's side of the bath, her hair done up skillfully, Rys was submerged past her shoulders, to the point that only her eyes were poking out of the water. She blew bubbles from her mouth until she ran out of breath. Then she would poke just her nose out above the water, breathe in deep, and sink back under. Balirossa, Uliminas, and Byleri were sitting alongside her, doing the same peculiar thing.

"Excuse me..." ventured Ellie, giving them a curious look. "Is that how one is meant to take a bath in a hot spring?"

"It can't be..." Boralis said, every bit as puzzled as her queen. "Can it...?"

"Ah," said Hiya, walking up to the pair from outside the water. They had already bathed. "The wife of the Exalted One and her companions are praying to be blessed with children."

"Blessed...with children?" Ellie asked.

"Just so. The waters of the Yanagi Bath are said to be efficacious for those seeking such a thing. The last time we came here, the wife of the Exalted One spent as much time submerged in the water as she could, and not long after was indeed blessed with twins. She has come here in hopes of bearing the Exalted One further children, while her companions are praying for their firstborn, using the same method."

"Goodness!" said Ellie. "I see..."

"So this is *that* kind of bath..." said Boralis. The two nodded in understanding.

"That said," Hiya continued, "if this bath truly does have any effect, it is purely psychological. There is nothing particularly special about this water. You may enjoy it as you would any hot spring." Hiya bowed and went to take their leave.

"Oh? Are you finished with the bath, Mx. Hiya?" Ellie asked.

"I am afraid I have prior arrangements. I will be leaving ahead of

you. Let us meet again at the inn.” Hiya bowed again, and this time left the bath behind them.

“They’re leaving after we came all this way to visit the hot springs...?” Ellie mused.

“Perhaps they wish to visit one of the other baths,” said Boralis. “Let us pay it no mind and enjoy our bath together.”

“Yes.” Ellie nodded. “Of course.”

“Ahhh...” Boralis sighed. “It *does* feel wonderful...”

“I can feel my fatigue melting away...” said Ellie.

Thump thump thump thump thump...

“Hm?”

“Are those footsteps...?”

Ellie and Boralis turned to look towards the changing area, where they could hear the sound of feet thumping on the ground. And then, the door burst open.

“Yahoo! Hot springs, hot springs!” Not taking any trouble to hide her naked body at all, Wyne raced from the changing area and leapt with a great cheer right into the bath.

“Eek!” Ellie shrieked.

“Watch out!” shouted Boralis.

The two covered their faces with their hands, shielding their eyes from the splash...but it never came.

“Wh-What?” Wyne said, a hapless expression on her face as she dangled in midair, mere inches from the water. “What... What?”

“Wyne!” Elinàsze scolded her. “Didn’t papa *just* tell you not to jump in the bath?” Elinàsze had come in after Wyne. Her arm was extended, and a magic circle floated before her.

Ellie and Boralis could hardly believe what they were seeing. “Elinàsze, was that *your* magic?” Ellie asked.

“It was,” Elinàsze answered as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. Ellie and Boralis could only stare.

“Sh-She can already cast Levitate, at her age?” Ellie whispered to her guard captain.

“It takes members of our Magic Corps four or five *years* to master that spell...” Boralis whispered back.

The two watched as Elinàsze lowered Wyne back down to the side of the bath. “Now let’s get you properly cleaned up,” Elinàsze said.

“I’m sorry, Eli-Eli...” Wyne said, bashfully apologizing as the two went hand in hand to wash themselves off.

“Ha ha!” Elinàsze laughed as Wyne splashed water on her. “The water’s so warm!”

“It is, isn’t it? Do me, do me!”

“Yeah, okay!”

The two cheerfully cleaned off each other’s bodies as Ellie and

Boralis watched on. Next to them, Rys, Uliminas, Balirossa, and Byleri continued to noisily blow bubbles under the water.

Blub blub blub blub blub blub blub...



◇Kinosaki Hot Springs Village—Main Street◇

By the time the men had gotten out of the bath, there was still no sign that Rys, Uliminas, Balirossa, and Byleri were going to emerge anytime soon.

“Do you suppose it’s all right for us to leave them behind?” Ellie asked as she walked.

Flio was wearing his usual easygoing expression. “It shouldn’t be a problem,” he said. “They all know where the inn is. I’m sure they’ll be back by dinnertime.”

“I see...” Ellie looked relieved. “All is well, then.”

“I’m not worried about Rys and the girls,” Flio said, looking over at something ahead of them. “What *I’m* worried about is...”

Ellie followed Flio’s gaze to see Wyne shouting at a street vendor who was selling skewers of meat. “More!” she cried. “I want more! Buy me more, Bora-Bora!” She was holding five skewers in each hand, but as she shoveled them into her mouth two at a time, it didn’t take long at all until she was again empty-handed.

“M-Miss Wyne, hold on a moment!” Boralis objected. “We’re out of small change...” Turning to address the vendor she asked, “Might we pay with a hundred-gold coin, sir?”

“What?! One hundred?! I can’t give you change, you know. You might as well buy my booth itself if you’re going to pay *that* much. For one hundred, I’d happily sell it to you.”

“N-Nh...” Boralis hesitated. “I don’t think so. I’m going to the merchants’ guild to exchange this for smaller coins. Wait just a moment!” She ran off down the street at top speed.

“Gimme meat, mister!” Wyne demanded, her cheeks still stuffed full of food. Her ten skewers had been completely demolished. “More meat! More meat!”

“Right away! You’re a rich little missy, aren’t you?! I know you’re good for it, so have all you like!”

“Yay! Meat! Meat!” Wyne jumped in the air for joy.

Flio glanced over at Ellie and smirked. “Should I go pay our food bill, do you think?”

“O-Oh!” Ellie said. “There’s no need! Bor—I mean, my s-sister will be back soon, I think...” She smiled wryly as she stumbled over the word *sister*. “But Wyne certainly eats a great deal.”

“Yes,” said Flio. “Well, she is a young dragonewt. She’s gonna need a ton of food until she’s finished growing.”

“A dragonewt...” Ellie murmured in shock. *Dragonewts are rare even among dragons! I can’t believe one of them is part of Flio’s family...*

As she watched, the rare dragonewt set to work on her fresh set of

skewers.

◇Later, at the Inn◇

After they had finished wandering around the town, Flio and the rest headed back to the inn. It was built halfway up a hill a short way away from the hot springs.

Although it was not public knowledge, the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode had a room set aside in this inn for entertaining guests of the state. Many of the girls serving them had been trained at the knight's academy in Klyrode Castle.

As they approached their room, Boralis whispered something into Ellie's ear. "Your Majesty, is this truly acceptable? We will be staying with all of the other women of Flio's household..." It was just as she said; all the women in Flio's party were staying together in one big room.

Nearby, Wyne was rolling around on the floor in high spirits. "Yaaay! We get to stay in an inn!" The rest were speaking animatedly and changing into the yukata they had been provided.

"There is a room the two of us could stay in together," Boralis continued. "We have guards among the inn's staff on security duty there all day and all night..."

"I would rather stay with everyone," Ellie responded, smiling brightly. "After all, we've come this far together! Besides, could anywhere be safer than right here?" She pointed across the room, indicating all the powerful individuals around them. There was Flio's wife: the lupine demon Rys, one of the most powerful demons of all. There was one of Ghozal's wives: the hellcat Uliminas. There was Flio's adopted daughter: the dragonewt Wyne. And finally, Flio and Rys's firstborn: Elinàsze, who could already at her age use advanced magic.

And I don't see them here, Boralis mused, but Mx. Hiya, the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness—and Damalynas, the Grand Magus of Midnight, master of the black arts—are here as well. I suppose Her Majesty is correct... "Yes, I see," she said, bowing deep. "It is as you say, Your Majesty."

But Ellie flicked her on the forehead with her index finger, grinning mischievously. "What are you saying? I'm just your little sister Ellie! In what world does one address their younger sister as 'Your Majesty'?"

"A-Ah! Y-Yes! Of course, Ellie." Boralis hastily corrected herself, but she was obviously uncomfortable addressing her Queen that way.

Ellie giggled at Boralis's behavior. "Now, Boralis, my dear older sister, would you be so kind as to accompany me to the lavatory? I'm afraid I would rather not have Flio's household accompany me so far."

“Of course, Your Ma—I mean... Sure, Ellie!”

Boralis almost never got flustered like this. Ellie pressed her hand against her mouth, doing everything she could to keep herself from laughing. After a little bit, the two left the room and headed to the public toilets.

◇Somewhere in the Hot Springs Village◇

“Is this it, Your Divinity?”

“Yes it is, my dear Damalynas.”

After Hiya left the bath ahead of the rest of the group, they retrieved Damalynas from their mindscape, and together they headed for a certain building in the Kinosaki Hot Springs Village. It was a large building with a grand, colorful front entrance. It looked like it existed in a different world from the buildings around it.

“In this building, the *Kinosaki Museum of Erotic Art*,” Hiya said, “books, paintings, and other artifacts pertaining to sexuality and sexual culture are gathered from all lands. Whether they be ancient or modern—made by humans, demihumans, or even demons—all are on display.”

“I had no idea there was a place like *this* hidden between all the hot springs,” Damalynas remarked. “It’s the *perfect* place to take our training to the next level!”

“Indeed. When I heard of this place from a woman I met by chance in the hot springs, my eyes must have opened two entire millimeters.”

Damalynas was stunned. Usually Hiya’s eyes were so narrow it was hard to tell if they were open or closed. Damalynas had never seen such a thing in all her time with Hiya. “W-Wow! That much?!”

“And now, when we have at last arrived at the promised land...” Hiya turned to face the entrance to the Museum of Erotic Art. There was a poster on the door that read “Closed.”

“No... It can’t be...”

“To think that I, the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness, could make such an error...”

Damalynas and Hiya slumped their shoulders in defeat. They may have just been shocked, but either way, they didn’t move from the spot for quite some time.

◇Meanwhile, Next to the Inn’s Public Toilets◇

As this inn was used by the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode to entertain important individuals, waiting ladies—skilled fighters hidden among them—were everywhere, even by the entrance to the toilets, just in case the worst should happen.

Ellie finished her business, sighed as she readjusted her outfit, and knocked sharply on the wall. Another knock came in reply. That was a signal to Boralis in the neighboring stall. Boralis was in charge of Ellie's security, and had remained on standby just in case.

The two opened the doors to their stalls at the same time. And then, suddenly, a cloud of inky darkness appeared, filling the women's restroom. It enveloped not only Ellie and Boralis, but the attendants who were standing outside.

Nobody moved an inch. It was like time itself had stopped moving within the darkness. And then, a gap opened. It parted, and in stepped the devil Belianna. In her hand was the great scythe she had used to cut a hole into the extradimensional space. She turned to face Ellie.

"Damned Maiden Queen," she said. "You were protected by that damned group of weirdos the whole time you were in the city, and security in that inn was damned tight. It was damned hard to catch you in my Dimensional Rift. Oh well..." She aimed the blade of her scythe at Ellie's immobilized neck, grinning fiendishly as she prepared to slice. "But the reward will be worth every damned bit of effort!"

"Miss Ellie!!!" A boy's voice rang out inside the Dimensional Rift. The boy dove inside at top speed, and scooped Ellie up.

"Wh-What?!" Belianna was caught off guard. She swung her scythe, but Ellie was already gone. Her slash hit nothing but air. "Damn! Who dares to get in my damned way?! Dammit!" She glared at the intruder. It was Garyl, carrying Ellie in his arms. "A damned kid?" she said, surprised to see his youthful face. "How can you move your damned body inside my Dimensional Rift?!"

Belianna's Dimensional Rift only affected a small area, but it had the ability to halt the movement of any living creatures within it. Only she, the caster, should be immune to the effect.

Garyl, still carrying Ellie, positioned himself in front of Boralis to protect her and glared down the devil. "Dimensional Rift? What's that? I just thought I could feel something weird happening in the girl's bathroom."

"Well, isn't that damned interesting," Belianna said. "I suppose I will just have to kill you f...f...first?" Just as she said that, a look of alarm crossed her face. *Th-This presence!* She wheeled around to see a man wearing a wolf mask. Belianna had seen this man before.

"You!" she said. "The damned Wolf of Justice! To think we would meet again here!"

Belianna had encountered Flio in his guise as the Wolf of Justice a few months ago. She had tried to attack him with her deftly wielded scythe but had somehow ended up losing. She wasn't exactly sure what had happened herself; she only knew that she'd been captured.

"It's your damned fault I'm on probation!" she shouted. "But

vengeance will be mine!" She dashed forward, swinging her scythe.

The Wolf of Justice held out his hand.

"Hmm..." he said. "Come to think of it, I *do* remember you. Sorry about this, but there's a crowd forming outside. It might start a panic if this goes on any longer."

A magic circle appeared. And the next thing she knew, Belianna was unconscious.



"What?!" Ellie cried as she regained consciousness. There was a boy right in front of her face.

"Miss Ellie!" he said.

"Y-Yes?!" Ellie exclaimed, flustered and confused.

A look of relief crossed Garyl's young face when he saw she was awake. "I'm so glad you're okay!" he said. "I kept calling your name, but you wouldn't wake up. I was so worried..."

Ellie looked again at the boy in front of her, realizing who he was. It was Garyl. She was lying on the floor with Garyl sitting next to her and holding her half-upright, supporting her head with his right arm.

Ellie flushed red when she realized what situation she was in. Her sudden change in color sent Garyl into a panic. "H-Huh?! Miss Ellie, are you okay?! Mom! Something's wrong with Miss Ellie! Her face went all red all of a sudden!" The rest of Flio's household was here around them, Rys included.

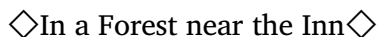
"N-No! It's nothing! I'm okay! I'm okay, Garyl! I don't need to be looked at, I swear!"

"Huh? B-But..."

"I'm okay! I'm okay! Really!"

Garyl looked at Ellie with an expression of concern. Ellie had turned scarlet in his arms.

Rys watched as the two kept on in that vein, a wry smirk on her face. "Boralis is unhurt," she said, "and judging by her reactions, Ellie seems fine as well. So that just leaves..." She turned to look out of the window.



Belianna's eyes shot open. "Wha?!"

"Miss Belianna," the Wolf of Justice said. "May I call you that?" He was standing nearby, still masked. Belianna still had no idea that under that mask was Flio.

"Tch," Belianna grumbled. "Looked into my damned mind while I was unconscious, did you? I don't know who you are or where you're from, but for calling yourself the Wolf of Justice, you are quite the

damned bastard.” Despite her language, Belianna was troubled by the fact that her body seemed to be completely unhurt.

“I’ll admit it...” she said, pulling herself up to sit cross-legged on the ground. There was a sheet underneath her. It looked like the Wolf of Justice had placed it there for her. “You’ve defeated me, the great devil Belianna, not once but twice. And in a single second no less. You’re quite powerful, Mister Wolf of Justice. But why didn’t you kill me? You know how damned spiteful I am. Aren’t you afraid I’ll come to kill you again, or your Maiden Queen?”

“You are correct,” the Wolf of Justice said. “When you were unconscious, I looked into your mind. I apologize for the confusion. It seems you’re trying to accrue enough merit to be made one of the Dark Army’s Infernal Four?”

“Yeah. And I’ll do absolutely anything to get it. Do you have a damned problem with that?”

“And the reason you are in such a hurry to become an Infernal...” the Wolf continued. “It’s your sister, isn’t it?”

“Tch. You looked damned deep into my memories...”

“I know. I’m sorry. I have children about your sister’s age, you see. I couldn’t help taking an interest.”

Belianna sighed heavily. “As you already damned well know,” she said, “my sister is a half-devil. The child of my father and a human woman. And because of that damned human blood in her, she can’t live in demon territory. Humans are the enemy, after all. But...if I were to become an Infernal, nobody would raise a damned peep if I let her live in my mansion.”

“You are very kind to your sister,” the Wolf of Justice observed.

“What is *that* supposed to mean? That *kindness* is why I came to kill the damned Maiden Queen, your ruler, isn’t it?”

“I don’t think you need me to tell you,” the Wolf pressed on. “But becoming an Infernal is only a temporary measure.”

“What in the damned hells do *you* know about it...”

“You’ve come to realize the limits of your power. That’s why you’re willing to do anything, no matter how despicable, if only it will get you chosen as the fourth Infernal. All so you can be with your sister as soon as possible.”

“Shut up.” Belianna looked the other way, trying her hardest to ignore the Wolf of Justice. But he kept talking.

“If you really want to become stronger, I’d be happy to train with you. I might be able to help. But for now, I will send you home.” The Wolf of Justice extended his arm and spoke a short incantation, conjuring a magic circle.

“You bastard. You’ll regret letting me...go?” Belianna looked up. She was no longer in the trees near the Kinokuni Hot Springs Village,

but in a forest not far from the Dark Citadel.

She punched the ground as hard as she could, growling in frustration. “Damned Teleportation! He sent me back! Damn that Wolf of Justice!”

But...what should I do? For a while she stayed there in the forest, staring into space.

◇Kinosaki Hot Springs Village—The Inn◇

Flio teleported back to the inn. It looked like things had already returned to normal.

“My lord husband!” Rys cried, running up to him when she noticed he was back. She was still wearing her yukata.

“Sorry to take so long, Rys,” Flio said. “Is everything going well here?”

“Yes. Ghozal used the spell Memory Manipulation to erase all memory of the incident from the humans at the inn. It’s like nothing ever happened. But what happened with our assassin?”

“We had a bit of a talk, and then I sent her back to the Dark Army’s territory.”

“You spared her life again?”

“I did. I don’t think she’s a bad person.”

“If you say so, my lord husband, then it must be the case...” Rys said. “But if she ever tries to harm you, Garyl, Elinàsze, Wyne, or anyone in the house...even you won’t be able to make me spare her, my lord husband.” As she spoke, her teeth elongated to the distinctive fangs of a lupine demon, and her eyes shone with light.

Lupine demons have strong pack instincts. Rys thought of their house as her pack, with her husband Flio at the top of the hierarchy. That put her, his wife, in the position of aide and advisor. That was why she was so protective of the household. They were as good as family to her.

“I know,” Flio said, his smile as carefree as ever. “I decided to give her one last chance. But if she attacks us *three* times...”

Rys put away her fangs, and her eyes returned to normal. “Well, then, shall we eat? Wyne has already started. If we don’t hurry, fairly soon there may be nothing left.”

“You’re right. With Wyne’s appetite, anything is possible. Let’s hurry.”

“Let’s!”

The two hurried through the hallway, Rys’s arm wrapped around Flio’s. Everything was peaceful, like the attack had been only a figment of their imagination.



That night, Flio's household, Ellie, and Boralis gathered in the grand hall to eat dinner together. Flio went to fetch Blossom and Belano, who had been holding down the fort, with Teleportation. That way they could at least join them for dinner.

In the middle of the table was an intimidatingly massive fish. Wyne was already on her way towards it, breaking out into a run. "Big fish!" she shouted. "I'm gonna eat it!"

"Hold up, Wyne!" Ghozal shouted. "That fish still needs to be cut into—"

Munch munch munch... Wyne was already devouring the fish whole. "What was that, Gho-Gho?" she said between bites.

"Don't call me Gho-Gho! I was looking forward to seeing this famous *sashimi* I hear these humans are so good at..."

"Well, then," Flio said. "In that case, shall I order us some more food?"

"Hrm! Good idea, Mister Flio!"

"Yay!" Wyne cheered. "Another fish! Another!"

"Wyne!" Ghozal snapped. "You..."

Wyne and Ghozal kept on like that, while the other guests chatted happily to each other.

"I-Is Wyne always like that?" Ellie asked.

"Pretty much!" said Garyl. "Big sis Wyne's always fun, and nice, and cheerful..."

"I see!" Ellie laughed.

Boralis watched Ellie and Garyl with a fond smile on her face as Ellie burst into laughter at the sight of Uliminas barging into Ghozal's argument with Wyne to hit him on the head with a giant paper fan. *I don't know if I've ever seen Her Majesty enjoying herself so much! I suppose this is another boon from our cooperation with Lord Flio's house...* She took a bite of food, enjoying the happy sight.



Wh...What happened? Ellie thought, a look of distress on her blushing face. *I can't seem to remember! Let me see... Last night, after dinner, myself and a few others went for another visit to the baths before bed. Right?*

"Zzz... Big sis..." Garyl mumbled in his sleep.



The truth was this: Garyl had left the men's bedroom in the night to use the toilet, but on his way back, he accidentally entered the women's room. Mistaking Ellie for Wyne, he crept into bed with her to sleep cuddled up with the girl he thought was his sister.

What? Ellie thought. Did he just call me his big sister? Does he think I'm Wyne? What... What do I do?

Just as she was wondering how she was going to get out of this situation, the actual Wyne appeared. "Mrrh..." she mumbled sleepily. "I'm over here, Gare-Gare..." She grabbed Garyl by his yukata and pulled him into bed with her. Wyne wrapped her arms around her brother and immediately fell back to sleep.

"Zzz..." Garyl mumbled again. "Big sis..."

The two slept on soundly.

Ellie breathed a sigh of relief to be alone in her bed again. *I can't imagine he came in here to do anything untoward*, she thought. *Garyl may be quite the robust young lad, but he is still a child. Although he is quite robust...especially his chest, and arms...* Ellie shook her head. *Wh-What am I thinking?! Get it together! Don't humiliate yourself!*

Ellie, once again blushing furiously, pulled the blanket over her head. She pretended to be asleep until the others began to rouse.



They roamed around the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode for another week after their visit to the hot springs. Nobody realized that the Maiden Queen was among them, and the observations she had made while traveling undercover proved tremendously useful in governing the kingdom. But the people around her did take note that the Queen was spending more and more of her time between her official duties lost in her thoughts...

◇ Houghtow City—Flio's House ◇

A few days after they returned home from their trip, Garyl was in the living room playing with Sybe in its unicorn rabbit form, a big smile on his face. "Dad, that trip was so much fun!"

Flio smiled back at his son. "I'm glad you had a good time! Your father did too!"

"Um..." Suddenly, Garyl ran up to him.

"Hm? What is it, Garyl?"

"It's just..." he started, clearly a little embarrassed. "Will we be able to see Miss Ellie again?"

Flio gave his son his usual easygoing smile. "Of course!" he said.

“I’m sure of it.”

“We will?” Garyl beamed. “Ehe hee... I can’t wait!”

Chapter 3: Yuigarde Calls It Quits

After returning from her inspection of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, the Maiden Queen set herself to restructuring her kingdom's defenses. She had new, stronger fortifications built. She had the roads leading to the front lines maintained. She even rethought the supply chain itself. The Magical Kingdom had never been more prepared for the Dark Army to attack.

The Dark Army, meanwhile, had still yet to hear a single word from the Dark One Yuigarde since he led his forces in pursuit of the rebels. They were unable to implement any kind of strategy, and morale was plummeting by the day.

◇In a Forest◇

A ragtag group of four made their way through a forest overgrown with trees and ivy. The one man in the group—an intrepid blond who went by the name Hero Gold-Hair—turned to face Tsuya as she led the way, holding a map in one hand. “Hey, Tsuya,” he said. “Are you sure this is the right way?”

Tsuya smiled. As usual, she was wearing a set of truly scanty clothing, which she hid underneath her heavy cloak. “Yes, Hero Gooold-Hair! We’re aaalmost at the booorders of the Maaagical Kiiingdom! We shoould reach the ciity soon...”

Gold-Hair nodded. “Those magic beasts we slayed in the Dark Army’s territory should fetch a high price from the human adventure guild! We should sell them as soon as we can.” He patted the Bottomless Bag he wore on his belt. Inside it, he had stuffed a huge number of magic beast carcasses—Hero Gold-Hair and his Drilldozer Shovel had been busy indeed, hunting magic beasts with pitfall traps.

This had been their lifestyle for some time. They would sneak into Dark Army territory, somewhere near the Klyrode border, where they would trap magic beasts to sell in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode for funds for their continuing journey.

Valentine was taking up the rear, bouncing cheerfully on her feet as she walked—practically skipping. “Hee hee hee! And then we can get a delicious meal in the city, my lord! Oh, it’s been too long!”

“I suppose,” said Hero Gold-Hair. “But didn’t you fill up your magic with that super high-powered magic gem we bought the other day? I thought you didn’t need to eat again for a while.”

Valentine wagged her finger. "Oh, don't be so boorish, my lord! True, I have no reason to worry about running out of power, but... Oh, what is it that you humans say? 'That was then, and this is now!'" She pressed her hands to her cheeks, color rising in her face as she began to smile deliriously at the thought of food. "Meat...and soup...and bread...and those lovely little fried things! My, I've had all sorts of delicious food since I came to this world! I can hardly even remember all of them!"

Hero Gold-Hair staggered back, taken off guard by Valentine's enthusiasm. But Valentine stepped closer, pressing her upper body against him. "Life would be terribly dull if we didn't taste something delicious every now and then. Don't you agree, my lord?"

"I-I suppose I *do* enjoy a bit of good food myself..." Hero Gold-Hair had to admit.

"Isn't it just lovely?" Valentine gushed. "Now come, my lord! Now that *that's* settled, we must reach the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode with all haste! The delicacies are calling out to us!"

Valentine rushed ahead past Tsuya to the front of the group. She was skipping properly now and even began to sing.

Riliangiu, who had once served under Valentine as a familiar of the Mistress of Evil, watched in disbelief. *She's acting like a child!* she thought. *Completely improper! Is this really the former General Valentine of the Twelve Evil Generals? The Mad Marquise herself? I can hardly believe my own eyes!* She watched said Mad Marquise skipping along without a care in the world, humming innocently to herself. *But...I think I like her better this way.*

Riliangiu ran along after Valentine as Hero Gold-Hair lagged behind. As the two Dark Worlders went on ahead, he moved up to Tsuya and whispered in her ear, "Well, Tsuya? How are we doing on money?"

"Juuust fine!" she whispered back. "Thanks to all those maaagic beeeasts you trapped, we have looots of money!"

"I see... Then perhaps it is a good time to treat her to a good meal."

"I gueeeess..." Tsuya said. "But is that really a goooood idea, Hero Gooold-Hair?"

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"Miss Valentine will eat aaanything! The ooother day I saw her eating raw magic beast meat! It seems like a waaaste to buy her nice food..."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Hero Gold-Hair rejoined. "That's *exactly* why we need to take her to a decent restaurant!"

"Huuuh?"

"That girl has been a huge help fishing up the magic beasts I hunt

out of the pitfall traps! What kind of leader would I be if I didn't reward her for her effort?!"

"Sh-She haaas?" Tsuya blinked.

"Yes, she has! I'm sure she's doing it because she wants to eat something properly delicious."

"W-Wooow! I didn't knooow that!"

"We're a team!" Hero Gold-Hair went on. "I'm counting on you too, Tsuya. Make sure you take care of the money stuff."

"Okaaay, Hero Gooold-Hair! Leave it to meee!"

Hero Gold-Hair nodded, satisfied. "Although if I'm being honest," he muttered, "I could go for some good food myself..."

"Hm?" Tsuya asked. "What was that, Hero Gooold-Hair?"

"I didn't say anything! Not one word!"

"My lord! My lady!" Valentine called back to the pair. "We should pick up the pace if we want to get there soon!"

"R-Right!" said Hero Gold-Hair. "Good thinking, Valentine. Come on, Tsuya! Let's hurry!"

"O-Okaaay!" Tsuya curtsied, and the two of them ran along after Valentine. She had gotten a decent ways ahead, so it took them some time to catch up.

◇The Dark Citadel◇

In the Dark Citadel's westernmost tower, Rayne the pandaman and Iuki the spider demon were standing watch. Rayne was munching on some bamboo from a nearby grove as he gazed out into the west when he seemed to notice something. "Hmmm?" He leaned out over the ramparts.

"You see something, Rayne?" Iuki asked.

"Something weird's happening in the desert..."

"The desert, you say?" Iuki went to take a look himself. The desert stretched far to the west of the tower. And on the far horizon, he could see something moving. "You're right..."

"Hmmm..." Rayne mumbled.

The two strained their eyes as they tried to figure out what was going on. Whatever it was, it was very far away for now, but there was no mistake—it was moving in their direction.

"I-Is that—?!" Iuki suddenly exclaimed. It looked like a group of demons in the desert.

"It... It is!" Rayne shouted. "It's the Dark One! It's the Dark One Yuigarde!"

Rayne slammed down on the tower's alarm button, and within moments a loud siren rang all throughout the tower. *Whee-oo! Whee-oo!*

"An alarm?!"

“What?! What’s happening?!”

The demons inside the tower all rushed outside to see the Dark One Yuigarde at the head of his rebel subjugation force, slowly drawing closer.

◇Five Days Later—Dark Citadel, Throne Room◇

Before long, demons all over the land had heard of Yuigarde’s return. Many demon clans sent emissaries to the Dark Citadel to offer their congratulations and well-wishes. For the first time in a long while, the building was full of life and activity.

And then, five days later, a great conference was held in the throne room. The Dark One Yuigarde was there, of course, as were the Dark Army’s Infernal Four and representatives of powerful demon clans and lords in charge of this domain or that. It was the long-awaited meeting of all the authorities under the aegis of the Dark Army.

Yuigarde sat gloomily before the assembled crowd, one elbow propped on his throne’s armrest, his fist supporting his head. He looked nothing short of exhausted. It was like all of his drive and fury had vanished, leaving him empty.

Yorminyt the Serpent Princess glared at Yuigarde, barely concealing her rage. Next to her, her colleague Hugi-Mugi sighed with both of their heads. It looked like their mind (or possibly minds?) was elsewhere.

The last of the three remaining Infernals, the skeleton Calsi’im, by contrast, stood at rapt attention, not moving an inch. *Goodness!* he thought. *It looks like this conference has gotten off to a bad start!*

Calsi’im’s minion, the magic doll Tia, shuffled up from behind him. “Calsi’im,” she said. “I thought I should be here in case something unfortunate happens, so that I may serve tea to everyone and settle their emotions.”

“I see...” Calsi’im mused. “That’s a big help! Thank you, Tia.”

“Of course,” Tia said. “This is the purpose for which I was made.”

“Tia... You’ve been working yourself to the bone, haven’t you?”

“Calsi’im, you promised not to worry about how much I work, remember?”

“Ahem!” Yuigarde’s underling Phufun cleared her throat and adjusted her false glasses. She looked over at Calsi’im and Tia. “Lord Calsi’im, may we begin the conference?”

Calsi’im and Tia immediately stepped away from each other. “Ah! Of course, of course!” the skeleton cried. “My apologies!” Tia moved behind her master.

That settled, Phufun looked over the whole of the throne room. “Now. You have been gathered here today for one reason: our master,

the Dark One Yuigarde, has returned from his expedition. I would therefore like to commence today's executive conference."

"May I go firsst?" Yorminyt's hand shot up the very instant Phufun finished her opening remarks. Yuigarde didn't move a muscle; only his eyes turned to look at her. "Your vanguard, O Dark One, wasss quite the magnificent force, wasss it not?" Yorminyt began. "You even went ssso far as to take my own persssoal guard, without notifying me firsst. In which cassse, my liege, I musst ask: where are my sssoldiers? I have heard rumorsss that you were accompanied by ssscarcely a thousssand demonsss when you returned. Isss thiss true?"

"Ah," Phufun said, doing her best to appear calm. "Yes. About that..."

"Can it." Yuigarde held up his hand.

"Did you just tell me to... 'can it'?" Phufun asked.

"Phufun," said Yuigarde. "You don't gotta say anything. I'll do the talking." Slowly, he stirred on his throne, bellyaching as he sat up straight. "Yeah. It was just a bit more than a thousand who came back with me. The rebels messed up our supply lines or whatever real bad. We didn't have any godsdamned food. If you wanna know where the rest of the soldiers are, well, they all just went and *left*."

Yorminyt shot him an icy glare. "And? Your sssupply linesss were sssevered, and your sssoldiers were dessserting. What did you do then?"

"What the hell do you think?! I kept advancing! We had to kill Zanzibar!"

"And did you?" Yorminyt asked.

Yuigarde grumbled and clicked his tongue.

"And *did* you?" Yorminyt repeated.

Yuigarde shot to his feet. "Tch! You seem to have a lot to say about it, don't you, snake?!" he shouted, no longer able to conceal his anger. His whole body turned red and began to grow as he shouted. "In the first place, they're *your* elite guard, aren't they?! Lazy bastards just whining and moaning! A bunch of deserters! Just goes to show you never gave them proper discipline!"

Yuigarde growled before shouting some more. "And you! Hugi-Mugi! Your underlings *sucked*! No matter how many times I told them to scout, they never found anything useful!" He turned to his minion. "And Phufun! I'm angry with you too! I sent you *tons* of messages telling you to bring supplies, but we never got *anything* to eat! Are you shitheads even taking this seriously?!"

"M-Master!" Phufun objected. "I've explained the matter with the supplies to you time and time again! Your orders never reached us! I had no idea what the rebels had done! None of us even imagined that you weren't getting supplies!"

“Enough excuses!” Yuigarde bellowed, slugging Phufun full-on in the face with enough force to send her flying. Her body crashed into the wall of the throne room, lodging itself inside.

Phufun hacked out blood, her eyes rolling back in her head. But on her face was a big stupid grin. *Hee hee hee... Hee hee hee hee hee...! This pain! This sweet, beautiful pain! Master Yuigarde! This is what I've been looking for all this time! Aaaah... To think I should be allowed to taste such a splendid, lovely attack! I must be the luckiest succubus to ever live...*

A number of demons rushed to help Phufun, only to recoil when they noticed the look of bliss on her face. She was giggling intermittently despite the damage.

“Wh-What is Her Ladyship doing...?”

“I don't know. But it's creeping me out...”

For all that Phufun dressed herself like a dominatrix, the truth is that she was a masochist down to her very bones. She just about worshipped Yuigarde for the sweet, sweet pain he could inflict on her body. Far from being in distress, she looked like she was in a state of ecstasy.

Meanwhile, the throne room was noisy with demons whispering about the latest developments.

“Did he just *punch* Her Ladyship?!”

“Isn't this whole thing *his* fault in the first place?”

“He ordered the army to advance with no provisions...?”

“You can hardly blame someone for deserting under those conditions.”

“He took the Infernal Four's underlings without asking their leave?”

The whole room seemed to be against Yuigarde. Not one person could be heard speaking in his defense. Yuigarde looked around the room, grunting and grumbling. And then he sighed.

“Screw this!” he shouted. “I quit!” He took off the armlet that signified his status as Dark One, hurled it against the throne, and stormed out of the room.

That armlet was a priceless treasure—proof that its wearer was the true Dark One. It had passed from generation to generation of Dark Ones to reach Yuigarde's hands. And now it was sitting untended on top of the throne.

◇The Western Desert◇

Deep in a desert cave, concealed from view to the outside, hid Zanzibar and his rebels. With the help of the demon fox sisters, who were intimately familiar with the desert, they had been easily able to outwit Yuigarde and were currently living the high life as refugees.

The Shadow King had charged them an arm and a leg for their luxury, but Zanzibar, who was from a prestigious family of bloodsuckers, had plenty of treasure stashed away all over the land. As long as he could evade the Dark One's pursuit, he would have no trouble paying up.

One day, Zanzibar was lounging on the sofa, drinking fine liquor, when Meiden burst in through the door with a report that made him leap to his feet.

"What?!" he said. "Is that true, Meiden?"

"There is no doubt, Master," Meiden said. "We had not heard any reports of Yuigarde's forces nearby for some time, so I sent our scouts to investigate. It seems that the enemy has retreated to the Dark Citadel, for want of food."

"Gah ha ha!" Zanzibar laughed, thumping his chest triumphantly. "Then our plan to use the demon fox sisters to disrupt their supply lines was a success! I wish I could see the look on Yuigarde's face!" He grinned widely, laughing like a maniac. He'd had nothing but misfortune and defeat until now. Meiden had never seen her master look so happy.

When he eventually stopped laughing, he turned his attention back to Meiden. "And how is the army faring now that they've turned tail?" he asked.

"I have heard that they now have only around a thousand demons. Many of their number deserted; others chose to join our forces."

"Incredible! He started out with *scores* of thousands of soldiers! Oooh, he must be *tearing apart* the Dark Citadel!"

"What makes you say that?"

"Isn't it obvious? Yuigarde mobilized his entire army for this! And now, not only did he completely waste his fighting strength, but he didn't even achieve his objective of killing me! I'm sure all sorts of demons will be finding fault with him now. Tell me, Meiden, what do you suppose he'll do?"

"Hmm..." Meiden gave it some thought. "Yuigarde is short-tempered, of course, and an idiot to boot. I'm certain you're correct, Master."

The two shared a look, both smiling deviously.

"Meiden," said Zanzibar, "send spies to the Dark Citadel. We need to learn what exactly is happening there. And depending on the circumstances... Aha ha ha ha!"

"Yes, Master. It will be done immediately." Meiden bowed and left the room in haste.

Zanzibar grinned as he watched her go. "This might just be our chance to finally seize the Dark Citadel!" he said, draining another

glass of liquor.

◇Meanwhile...◇

While Zanzibar laughed to himself, Gintsuno the Silver was in a small room directly above, watching him closely. Kintsuno the Gold had created a magic window here when Zanzibar had taken refuge with them, mostly for the purpose of spying. The room itself was hidden with a powerful Concealment spell, so Zanzibar and Meiden never noticed they were being watched.

They had to rebuild the spy room every time Yuigarde's army got close and flee to a different safe house, of course, but they billed Zanzibar for the cost along with all of the rest of the protection fees they were making him pay. It was hidden amongst a truly tedious list of sundry expenses, so Zanzibar's people never noticed they were being charged for the privilege of being spied on.

Gintsuno scowled as she watched the proceedings. "Well, this isn't good. We were *supposed* to be leading them around the nose of the Dark Army, milking them for protection money the whole time! We even slipped in a few falsehoods to make them think they were in more danger than they were! If the Dark Army's gone, Zanzibar might find out he's been lied to. I need to tell the Shadow King..."

Sighing in agitation, Gintsuno left through the room's secret door.

◇Deeper in the Cave◇

Gintsuno the Silver cautiously exited the secret room through a door designed to look like a natural cave wall and headed deeper into the cave to where she and her sister had their private chamber. There were several rooms here—one for the Shadow King, one for the demon fox sisters, and one for their underlings.

Soon, all three of them—Gintsuno the Silver, Kintsuno the Gold, and the Shadow King—were gathered together, discussing what Gintsuno had learned.

"You're right," the Shadow King said, clicking his tongue. "This isn't good at all."

The Shadow King had once been the ruler of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, but when his evil deeds came to light, including his misappropriation of public funds for his own selfish ends, his own daughter Elizabeth had him removed from the castle and took the throne to reign as the Maiden Queen.

But the Shadow King wasn't finished. He had always been the head of a secret underworld organization, and now that he was no longer King of Klyrode, he devoted all of his time to that enterprise. He took to calling himself the Shadow King, and joined forces with the

demon fox sisters.

“That devil... Zanzibar, was it?” the Shadow King said. “I’m certain he has more money stowed away. We were making a real killing off his protection money. But if the Dark One is gone, our scheme won’t work!”

Kintsuno sighed. “So it seems,” she said. “And here I thought we had gotten our hands on a real whale...”

The Shadow King nodded in agreement and turned to look at Gintsuno. “Tell me, Gintsuno. Do you know when Zanzibar plans to leave us?”

“Well,” Gintsuno said, giving it some thought, “Zanzibar told his minion Meiden to send spies to the Dark Citadel. If you consider how long it should take them to get there, gather information, and return...I would imagine they’ll be here another fortnight, at the very least.”

“Hmm... A fortnight...” The Shadow King reached into his suit pocket and pulled out a scroll, which he unfurled on the large table in the middle of the room.

“A map?” Kintsuno observed.

“Is that a map of the Dark Army’s territory?” asked Gintsuno.

“It is indeed! But...” He pointed to the map, indicating a number of places where they could see a small red X printed.

“What do those markings mean?” Kintsuno asked.

“*Those*, my friend, are...” the Shadow King began, indicating for Kintsuno and Gintsuno to come closer. He whispered something surreptitiously into their ears. The fox sisters nodded along, and when the Shadow King’s explanation was finished, they all burst out in grins.

“Incredible!” Kintsuno yipped.

“You planned *that* far ahead?” Gintsuno marveled.

“Well,” the Shadow King said, “I think you understand the situation. I’ll leave the rest in your hands.”

“Of course!” Kintsuno said.

“Leave it to us!” Gintsuno added.

The two darted out of the room, while the Shadow King stayed behind, grinning wickedly.

◇Three Days Later—The Dark Citadel, Phufun’s Chambers◇

It took three entire days for Phufun to regain consciousness after being lodged in the wall by Yuigarde’s punch. It was Coqueshtti, the little mad scientist girl, who broke the news to her.

“Wh-What?!” Phufun exclaimed, jumping out of her bed. “Master Yuigarde has been missing for three days?!” Her face went pale. She did her usual gesture of adjusting her false glasses, but since she had

only just woken up, her glasses were still resting on her bedside table. All she did was poke at the bridge of her nose.

“Y-Yes, my lady...” Coqueshtti answered, holding up Yuigarde’s armllet for Phufun to see. “He left this behind in the throne room before vanishing.”

“He... He left behind the crest of the Dark One? Don’t tell me he’s forsaken the Dark Army...!” Phufun put on her glasses and properly adjusted them this time. “No. I refuse to believe it. The state of the Dark Army weighs heavily on Master Yuigarde’s heart. He is only secluding himself for a time—that must be it!” Phufun used a spell to conjure her usual outfit and hurried out the door.

Coqueshtti chased after her. “E-Excuse me, my lady!” she said. “Where are you going?!”

“Isn’t it obvious? I have to find Master Yuigarde so I can convince him to return to the Dark Citadel!”

“Uh... Um...”

“What? Do you still have something to say?”

“Oh! Um... What should we do with this?” Coqueshtti asked, again holding up the armllet.

Phufun’s expression went stiff. *Th-That’s right... Someone needs to serve as regent while the Dark One is away...* After thinking for a while, she motioned for Coqueshtti to follow her down the hallway and said, “Come with me.”

“Wh-Wh-What?!” Coqueshtti exclaimed. “Yes! Yes, my lady!”

◇The Dark Citadel—Yorminyt’s Chambers◇

Phufun moved through the hallways of the Dark Citadel to stop outside of one room in particular—the personal chambers of the Serpent Princess Yorminyt, head of the Infernal Four. She knocked, opened the door, and brought Coqueshtti inside.

“Lady Yorminyt,” she said. “I would like to talk with you about—” Phufun stopped in her tracks. Yorminyt’s room was usually decorated and partitioned with many folds of gossamer cloth strung about. But now it was empty, with no sign of the cloth or even much furniture at all.

“Wh-What in the world...?” Troubled, Phufun pressed her glasses up against the bridge of her nose.

Coqueshtti waved her arms, getting Phufun’s attention. It seemed like she had noticed something. “My lady!” she said. It was an envelope left lying on the desk. “There’s something here!”

“What could that be...?” Phufun wondered. She took the envelope from Coqueshtti and opened it. “No!”

Inside were two Demon Rings, and a note reading simply, “Sssee you.”

The Demon Ring was a ring set with a magic gem granted by the Dark One to the members of his army as a sign of the oath of fealty they had taken. If one could no longer follow the Dark One's orders, they were to return the Demon Ring and leave the Dark Army immediately.

"These rings belong to Yorminyt and her assistant Helzarmas!"

"Their Demon Rings?" Coqueshtti echoed. "Then those two are..." Phufun wobbled on her feet, clutching the letter and the two rings. Coqueshtti gave her a worried look. "U-Um... My lady, is something the matter?"

"W-Well!" Phufun said. "I'll just have to convince Yorminyt to come back to the Dark Citadel as well, after I persuade Yuigarde! But first...who to pick as regent...?"

Phufun placed the letter and rings in her magical storage and left the room, Coqueshtti hurrying along behind her. Two bats had been watching them from the ceiling, but neither Phufun nor Coqueshtti noticed.

◇The Dark Citadel—Hugi-Mugi's Abode◇

The doppeladler Hugi-Mugi took for their residence the large hollow underneath the Dark Citadel itself. As an enormous two-headed bird, they needed more space than the Dark Citadel offered to stretch their wings; this allowed them to spend time in their natural form.

"Excuse me, Lords Hugi-Mugi!" Phufun cried as she entered in evident haste. Usually, Hugi-Mugi could be found sleeping in the middle of the hollow, but today they were nowhere to be seen. "H-Hm? Are they, perhaps, still in their demon form?"

Phufun spread her own wings and flew around the room, poking all over, but Hugi-Mugi was nowhere to be seen. "How strange..." she muttered, an expression of growing panic on her face as she adjusted her glasses. "Ah?" After the umpteenth time around the room, Phufun noticed something shining on the giant rock Hugi-Mugi used as a bed. Phufun alighted beside it to get a closer look.

"Th-This is...!" Phufun's face stiffened and her eyes went wide. There, on the rock, was Hugi-Mugi's Demon Ring. *It can't be! Not only Lady Yorminyt, but Lords Hugi-Mugi as well?!* Beads of cold sweat began to run down her forehead as she adjusted her glasses again and again. It was a nervous gesture she did to calm her nerves, and right now she needed her nerves to be calm so she could *think*.

"My lady..." Coqueshtti looked up at Phufun, deeply worried.

◇The Dark Citadel—Calsi'im's Chambers◇

Calsi'im's chambers were on the second floor of the Dark Citadel. The skeleton hadn't wanted any kind of grand quarters, but his room seemed far too modest to be the lodgings of an Infernal.

Phufun knocked and knocked, and then burst into the room. "Lord Calsi'im!"

But nobody responded.

Phufun glanced all over up and down the cozy room as Coqueshtti caught up. There was hardly any space to miss someone, yet there was no sign either of Calsi'im or of his minion Tia.

"L-Lord Calsi'im can't have turned his back on the Dark Army *too*, can he?" Phufun said, busying herself with her glasses as the nervous perspiration increased again in quantity.

"Oh no, oh no..." Coqueshtti said, covering her mouth with both hands. "Whatever is going to become of the Dark Army?!"

◇Flio's House—The Stables◇

While Phufun and Coqueshtti were standing in Calsi'im's room, stunned, Sleip was laughing heartily in the management room of the stables. "Well now, Calsi'im!" he said. "I never thought I'd see you show up *here* dressed like *that*!"

"Dressed like what now? Is something wrong?" Calsi'im asked, cocking his neck as he looked curiously at Sleip from his perch, sitting on his folded knees atop the sofa. He was wearing the same outfit he'd worn in the Dark Citadel—an ornate set of robes—and was carrying a grand staff. Every last detail of his appearance absolutely *screamed* "demon."

Sleip, incidentally, was dressed in a pair of overalls.

"Oh!" Calsi'im said suddenly. "That! Well, you know. At my age, I hardly have any magic power left to detect! As long as I keep the hood of this lovely robe Tia made up, I'll look like nothing more than a frail old human!" He laughed, clacking his lower jaw like a rattle.

Sleip, sitting across from him on the sofa he used to entertain guests and customers, joined in the laughter. "Regardless, I can't believe you came all this way to bring me some old effects I left behind at the Dark Citadel!" he said. "We were old colleagues in the Dark Army, I know, but there really was no need to go that far."

There were two wooden crates set on the floor next to Sleip. Inside, packed neat and tidy, were a number of things Sleip had left in his chambers in the Dark Citadel when he had left.

"Now, now, don't be silly," Calsi'im said. "It would never do to have my comrade's possessions sitting around gathering dust! That would be most upsetting. But Sleip...there's something I want to ask." He produced a letter from his robes and set it on the desk.

It read: "We wish for peace."

"I found this when I was packing up your room," Calsi'im said. "Now, I'm terribly sorry to have looked at your mail, but I must ask—who in the world wrote this letter?"

"Oh, that," Sleip said. "I wasn't trying to hide it or anything. Actually, you could say my elite soldiers and I owe our lives to the writer of that letter. He is someone who wishes for peace for all the world, from the bottom of his heart."

"My!" Calsi'im said in response, glancing at the letter once more.

"I'm sure you've heard of the Wolf of Justice?" Sleip asked.

"That's that man in a wolf mask who's allied himself with the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, isn't it? I've heard he'll go far out of his way to avoid killing demons, and he always releases his captives unharmed. Most peculiar for a human!" Calsi'im nodded. "I see... So the letter was from him..."

"It was," Sleip confirmed. "And I mean it when I say that it's thanks to the Wolf of Justice that I'm able to enjoy my retirement like this."

Just then, the door opened, and Byleri entered. "Like, greetings!" she said. "I, y'know, made tea!" Grinning, she set a cup each in front of Calsi'im, Tia, and Sleip.

"Ah, thank you, Byleri!" said Sleip.

"Like, totally!" Byleri beamed. "After all Dalc Horst and everyone's done to help with the horsies, making tea is, like, the least I can do, y'know?"

Calsi'im watched the two lovebirds smile at each other, his eyes shining. "I see!" he said. "Not just a peaceful retirement, but a wife too, eh, Sleip? How splendid!"

"Aha ha..." Sleip chuckled. "Well...I suppose!"

"Ehe hee!" Byleri giggled happily. "Like, thank you so much!"



In the lounge of the stables, Sleip and Calsi'im chatted on.

"I'm sorry for the delay, Mister Sleip," Flio said, smiling as he entered the room and sat down next to the lichsteed at his urging.

"Not at all, not at all!" Sleip said. "I'm sorry to have bothered you while you're so busy!" Then he turned to Calsi'im. "Calsi'im, this is the Mister Flio I mentioned. He's a friend of the Wolf of Justice—the man who wrote that letter."

Sleip, of course, knew perfectly well that Flio himself was the Wolf of Justice. He gave him a small wink, inconspicuous enough that Calsi'im couldn't see.

It seems like Mister Sleip wants to introduce me to Calsi'im as myself, and not the Wolf of Justice... Flio observed. "I'm Flio," he said, giving his guests an easygoing smile. "Nice to meet you!" He shook hands

with Calsi'im and Tia in turn.

"And I'm Calsi'im, an old comrade of Sleip who joined the Dark Army at the same time he did! Think of us as birds of a feather! Although, Sleip is more of a horse!" He laughed again, loudly rattling his bony jaw.

Tia hid her mouth behind her hands like she was trying to stop herself from grinning. "Oh!" she said. "Calsi'im! Your jokes are just too much!"

Huh...? Flio wondered, looking between the two. Was that supposed to be a joke? Should I have laughed?

Sleip clapped Flio on the shoulder. "I wouldn't force it," he said. "His jokes have always been bad. Just let him do it."

"I...see," Flio said, smirking as he nodded.

"Ah, sorry, sorry!" Calsi'im said, reining in his rattling jaw. "I couldn't help myself! Pardon me!"

"It's no trouble at all," Flio assured him, as carefree as ever.

"Tell me, Mister Flio," said Calsi'im. "Is it true that you married the Fenrys?"

"Yes!" said Flio. "Although now she's using the name Rys. She gave birth to twins not long ago. We've all been getting along very well. Oh, look! There she is!" He pointed out the window, where Rys was outside playing in the pasture with Garyl and Elinàsze. Garyl was riding a horse by himself while Elinàsze looked too timid to approach. Rys stepped up and helped her daughter mount one of the horses.

Calsi'im did a double take. *Is that...?! The savage lupine goddess Fenrys, who they used to call the fifth of the Infernal Four! She looks good smiling like that!*

After watching Rys for some time, Calsi'im turned his attention back to Flio. Flio and Sleip had been chatting amiably, in high spirits. *What a remarkable human, this Flio! He married the demon Fenrys, and is even on good terms with a former Infernal!*

◇Meanwhile, in a Forest◇

"Waaaah!" Yuigarde screamed. "Where did this hole come from?!"

Yuigarde had left the Dark Citadel and wandered in the forest with no destination in mind, his face hidden by a heavy cloak. But suddenly, as he was walking, the ground gave way beneath his feet, and he found himself slipping into a pit.

He grabbed onto the rim of the hole, narrowly avoiding plummeting to the bottom. He looked down, only to notice that the bottom of the trap was lined with spikes. If he fell into that in his human form, even he might not make it out unscathed.

"Damn! Let me think..." And so he did. "I could turn back into my demon form and fly out no problem, but if I did *that*, then those

assholes at the Dark Citadel would know where I am! I'll just have to get out without transforming..."

He pulled as hard as he could, but he wasn't used to moving in a human body, and he just couldn't muster the kind of power he needed. "Shit! Ghozal was right. I should have trained this body... It just won't move like I want it to! Damn it all to hell!"

Yuigarde strained and strained to pull himself up. A fleck of dirt hit his face—the lip of the hole was starting to crumble.

"Noooooooooooo!" he screamed as he fell.

And then, just as he thought all was lost, someone caught his arm.

"Gah!" his savior said. "Confound it, you're heavy! What have you been *eating*?! Valentine! Riliangiu! Come and help! Quickly!"

"Yes, my lord! Just a moment!" said Valentine.

"Right away," said Riliangiu. "Ngh! He really is heavy...!"

Hero Gold-Hair grabbed Yuigarde's arms. Valentine grabbed Gold-Hair's right leg, and Riliangiu took his left. Together, they pulled for all they were worth.

Snap! A sound rang out. Hero Gold-Hair had a bad feeling about what it might mean...

"What?!" he demanded. "What was that sound?!"

"Ah!" Valentine cried. "My lord, your pants are coming undone!"

"Your belt!" Riliangiu said. "Your belt broke into pieces!"

As the girls pulled, Hero Gold-Hair's pants flew off his body with distressing force. They scrambled to get a grip on Hero Gold-Hair's bare legs, his underpants right in front of their eyes.

"My!" Valentine marveled. "My lord, your buttocks are splendid! I want to touch them...!"

"Truly incredible," Riliangiu agreed. "I never thought I would see a human with such well-developed buttocks."

"Stop staring!" Gold-Hair snapped. "Tsuya! Find something to cover me! Now!"

"My lady, please don't!" Valentine begged. "His buttocks are nothing short of heavenly!"

"I must agree," said Riliangiu. "Please... Please leave them bare...just for a little longer!"

"Ummm..." Tsuya ruminated. "Right awaaaay, Hero Gold-Haaaair! But...who is thiiiis person?"

"Who cares?!" Hero Gold-Hair shouted. "Go get something to cover me! Valentine! Riliangiu! Pull!"





It didn't take long for them to hoist Yuigarde's enormous body up from the hole.

"Huff, huff..." Hero Gold-Hair panted. "I had a feeling something bad had happened, so I hurried over. I can't believe a human fell into my magic beast trap!"

"Jeez..." Yuigarde raised his hand in an awkward gesture of thanks. "Thanks for bailing me out there, Blondie."

"You don't need to thank me," Hero Gold-Hair said. "In fact, I owe you an apology! I must have put this one a bit too close to the road! My bad for setting a trap somewhere a human might stumble onto it. I caused you a great deal of trouble!" He bowed deeply.

"Wha—?!" Yuigarde's eyes opened wide in shock and confusion. *Wh-What's this blond guy saying?! If you get caught by a trap, it's your own fault for being careless! Come on!*

Yuigarde watched as Tsuya walked over to Hero Gold-Hair to hand him the belt she had finished restitching. "Hero Gooold-Hair sets looots of pitfall traps! He's suuuper careful to only go after maaagic beasts..."

"Of course I am!" Hero Gold-Hair said. "Middle of the forest or no, you can't go setting pitfalls anywhere you like! People won't want to deal with you if you keep catching them in traps!"

"Gh..." Yuigarde was speechless. *I put traps all over the place trying to catch that bastard Zanzibar! I ended up catching a lot of my own soldiers... Some of them complained, but I just told them it was their own fault! I hadn't noticed at the time, but now that I think about it, those folks abandoned the army pretty quick after that...* He slumped his shoulders, lost in memories of his time in the desert.

Hero Gold-Hair fastened his pants with the belt Tsuya had given him and turned to address Yuigarde. "We're going to a tavern after this. Do you want to come with us? We'll cover your meal, as an apology."

"W-Well, I..." Yuigarde choked out. He looked completely lost. Then suddenly his stomach rang out in an audible growl. "Gah! W-Well, I suppose I haven't eaten in a while..."

"Then that settles it!" Hero Gold-Hair gave Yuigarde a good push.

"Y-You're letting me come with you?"

"Of course! The more the merrier!" he said with a grin. "Call me Hero Gold-Hair!"

"'Hero Gold-Hair'..." Yuigarde echoed. *That name sounds kinda familiar! Didn't Phufun mention something like that? And come to think of it, I can't shake the feeling that I've seen him and that Tsuya lady*

somewhere before...

Phufun had told Yuigarde shortly after he took the throne that the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode had summoned a golden-haired hero from another world to defeat the Dark One. He had even seen the two himself when they were captured to use as sacrifices for their plot to wrest the throne of Dark One from his brother Gholl.

But Yuigarde, who really was all brawn and no brain, had no memory of any of those details. *No good. I just can't remember! I must be imagining things.*

"What should I call you, then?" Hero Gold-Hair asked.

"Huh?! Oh! Uh... My name is...uh...D-Dawkson! That's right! Dawkson!"

"Got it, Dawkson. Now, let's go!"

"All right! Thanks for the meal, Blondie!" Yuigarde said as Hero Gold-Hair pushed him along down the road.

Tsuya inclined her head as she watched them from behind, double-checking their remaining money. "Mister Daaawkson looks pretty biiiig..." she muttered. "I bet he eats a looot. I hope this isn't a proooblem..."

"Now, now," Valentine said as she and Riliangiu pushed Tsuya along behind Hero Gold-Hair and his charge. "I won't eat so much this time."

"There is no cause for concern," Riliangiu added, smiling just as brightly as Valentine.

"Oh... Okaaay..." Tsuya said, but a worried look crossed her face as they made their way to the nearby town.

◇Dark Citadel—Calsi'im's Chambers◇

Calsi'im and Tia flew across the land on the back of a dire crow. The two of them were both very lightweight, so they were able to make long journeys on the back of this bird. This was Calsi'im's familiar: a dire crow, a low-level magic beast. Riding on its back, he could infiltrate human lands without anyone taking notice.

"Goodness gracious!" Calsi'im exclaimed. "We talked for quite some time, didn't we? I do hope you weren't bored, Tia."

"I am having fun as long as you are, Calsi'im," Tia said, smiling back.

At first, Tia had been as expressionless as any other magic doll. But recently she had been responding when Calsi'im spoke to her with what seemed like genuine emotion. She would sometimes even end up rolling on the floor clutching her stomach and laughing uproariously at one of Calsi'im's terrible jokes.

Hmm... Calsi'im thought, nodding happily as he looked at Tia's smiling face. I don't know much about magic dolls, but this seems like

incredible progress!

At last, the dire crow flew in through the window of Calsi'im's room, delivering him home.

"Thank you for carrying such a heavy load again today," Calsi'im said, gently stroking the feathers on the dire crow's back. "You rest up, now! We'll make you a nice treat!" The crow hopped up close to Calsi'im and gave him an affectionate nuzzle.

Dire crows are quite intelligent, and known to be slow to trust their master if made a familiar. But the dire crow that served Calsi'im acted as fondly towards him as could be. It was a rare sight.

"Calsi'im, shall I prepare the— Ah." She stopped her question short.

Calsi'im, curious about Tia's behavior, turned to see that she was looking out the doorway. He followed her gaze to see Phufun and her assistant Coqueshtti standing right there.

Phufun took a step forward, pushing her glasses up. "Infernal Calsi'im... May I ask what business you had outside?"

"Oh!" Calsi'im responded. "They finished emptying out Sleip's old room, you see! So I was taking care of a few loose ends. Why do you ask?"

"You...haven't left the Dark Army?" Phufun asked.

"Leave the Dark Army?!" Calsi'im balked. "Tia and I are still wearing our Demon Rings, are we not? Why would you ask such a thing?" He raised his hand, showing Phufun the ring that shone on his finger. Tia did the same.

Phufun breathed a sigh of relief. *Well, she thought, at least one of the Infernal Four is still here. It may be the weakest Infernal in the whole history of the Dark Army, but this is an emergency, and he's better than nothing.* She cleared her throat. "Infernal Calsi'im, I am here to ask a favor of you."

"A favor? Of me? This doesn't seem like the usual sort. What do you need?"

"Well..." Phufun started. "You see... The truth is, Master Yuigarde has gone missing."

"What?!" Calsi'im's jaw dangled low in shock. "Missing?!"

"Not only that..." Phufun continued. "But Lady Yorminyt herself returned her Demon Ring and left the Dark Citadel."

"No! How can this be?!" Calsi'im's jaw somehow managed to fall even lower.

"Moreover, Lords Hugi-Mugi have followed suit. They too have returned their ring and vanished."

"I-I-Impossible!!!" Calsi'im's jaw was hanging as low as it possibly could now, in an absurd expression of surprise.

"I intend to persuade Master Yuigarde to return, but until then I

will need you, Lord Calsi'im, the last of the Infernal Four, to serve as regent. If you agree, of course." She held out her hand. In it was the armlet that signified the station of Dark One. She and Coqueshtti knelt before the skeleton.

"Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Whaaa—" Calsi'im started to shout, but his jawbone finally fell off his skull entirely, leaving him unable to speak.

"Calsi'im! No!" Tia dove, barely catching the jawbone before it hit the floor. "Hah..." she sighed. "Please, Calsi'im, you must be careful with your precious body!"

Wiping her brow, Tia dusted off the bone with a handkerchief and carefully fit it back into Calsi'im's skull.

Calsi'im pressed on it with both bony hands, clacking it around until it moved properly again. "A-Ah... Thank you, Tia!" he said, placing a hand on her shoulder. "You're always such a big help."

Tia took Calsi'im's hand in both of hers. "Calsi'im," she said, pressing close, "I told you, you don't need to thank me for anything..."

"Wow...!" Coqueshtti said, clapping her hands. "So lovey-dovey!"

Phufun adjusted her glasses. "Are you finished with the cheap comedy routine?" she asked, her eyes sharp as she stepped forward to place the Dark One's armlet on Calsi'im's left arm. "Now. Until such time as our lord, the Dark One Yuigarde, returns...I hereby entrust you with full authority over the Dark Army. We are at your command."

That settled that. Phufun spread her wings and took to the sky, leaving through the same window as Calsi'im's dire crow, and accelerated at once to her top speed. She was out of sight in no time. Calsi'im, Tia, and Coqueshtti could only watch.

"W-Well then, Tia..."

"Y-Yes, Calsi'im? What is it?"

"Um... If she put the Dark One's armlet on my arm, d-does that make me the Dark Regent?"

"S-So it seems..."

"Dark Regent Calsi'im..." muttered Coqueshtti.

"I can't believe it!" Calsi'im clutched his skull. "But...I have to tell everyone what has happened! Ohhh, I have a bad feeling about this..."

That day, Calsi'im called an officers' summit, where he revealed everything that had transpired—that Yuigarde had gone missing, that Yorminyt and Hugi-Mugi had left the Dark Army, and that Phufun had named him Dark Regent until Yuigarde's return. They had considered the possibility of fabricating a story more advantageous to themselves, but Calsi'im had refused. "Any lies we tell are bound to come to light eventually!" he said. "That's a surefire way of making everyone hate you!" And so, they had told the truth.

The throne room was abuzz with confused officers whispering to

each other, trying to make sense of what they had been told.

“The Dark One is missing?!”

“So now that he’s failed to get Zanzibar, he’s running away with his tail between his legs!”

“But Lady Yorminyt and Lord Hugi-Mugi...”

“I can’t imagine they enjoyed serving *that* Dark One...”

“What do you think is going to happen if the Dark One comes back, though? When he finds out they’ve abandoned him, he’s just going to leave again!”

“Yes, absolutely...”

“And the Dark Regent is Calsi’im?!”

“He’s so old... He could kick the bucket any day now...”

The next day, Tia came to Calsi’im with a worried look on her face. In her arms was a tremendous number of Demon Rings. Among them was Coqueshtti’s. The mad scientist girl had already left the Dark Citadel. It seemed that his announcement had spurred even more demons to quit.

“C-Calsi’im...” she said.

“I had a feeling this would happen...” he said. “Things are going to be a little difficult for the foreseeable future. I’m sorry, Tia...”

“Calsi’im...” Tia stood before Calsi’im, who was sitting on the floor in front of the throne, with a distraught look on her face. Neither of them noticed the bat watching from the ceiling.

◇Meanwhile, in a Tavern◇

“You two ate waaay too much...” Tsuya sobbed as she checked their remaining money.

“Ah, well...” Dawkson, the newest member of the group, scratched his head and mumbled out an apology. “Sorry.”

“I’m so, so sorry I keep doing this, my lady!” Valentine said, curling in on herself in shame.

The night before had been a terrific feast. Hero Gold-Hair and Dawkson hit it off right away.

“Ha ha ha!” Dawkson laughed. “Who knew eatin’ and drinkin’ could be so much fun! Thanks, Blondie!”

“It is, isn’t it!” Hero Gold-Hair agreed. “Don’t hold back, now! Eat up!”

“Yes!” Valentine cheered. “If that is your order, my lord, then I, Valentine, will eat everything I can! No limits!”

They ate and ate without restraint until the early hours of the morning. And when Tsuya paid their bill, they were left completely broke.

“Hooonestly!” Tsuya went on, gesticulating in anger at Valentine and Dawkson—the principal offenders in the present case of food crime. “I don’t waaant to say you shouldn’t enjoy your fooood and driinks, but this is waaay too much!”

The group looked absolutely dispirited. Dawkson was absolutely enormous, and even Valentine was tall for a woman, but right now they were withering before the much smaller Tsuya. The sight drew plenty of looks from passersby.

Hero Gold-Hair and Riliangiu watched from the back. “Perhaps I should look for work, sir?” Riliangiu suggested.

“Hmmm...” Hero Gold-Hair pointed to an advertisement on the bulletin board in front of the tavern. “There just might be a way.”

The advertisement read: “Seeking contestants! Yearly Osahka Town Eating Contest!”

“Perhaps we should try entering that!” Hero Gold-Hair exclaimed.

“What does this flier mean?” Riliangiu asked.

“It seems that this Osahka Town place is holding an eating contest! They’ll give you a limited time to eat as much as you possibly can. And there’s even a prize!”

“Wh-What did you say, Blondie?!” Dawkson exclaimed. “I’ll do it! Leave it to me!” He flexed his arms demonstrably.

“It’s like this was *made* for Dawkson and me!” said Valentine, laughing loudly and posing voluptuously.

“Well, I suppoose...” Tsuya said, creasing her forehead dubiously. “It doooes seem peerfect for you two... But Hero Gooold-Hair...they’ll make you pay a peenalty if you can’t eat the whooole thiiiiing...”

“I see...” Gold-Hair mused. “It doesn’t say that anywhere on the flier, but I guess that’s how these sorts of things work...”

“Now, now, my lady!” Valentine said, running up behind Tsuya. “Don’t worry about a thing!”

Dawkson was right behind her. “Yeah! There ain’t nothing me and Valentine can’t eat!”

Tsuya crossed her arms and tilted her head. “I dunnooo...” she said. “I have a baaad feeeling about this...”

Hero Gold-Hair gave Tsuya a friendly smack on the shoulders. “What’s there to worry about? We should at least check it out! If anything seems off, we don’t have to participate.”

“I gueess...” Tsuya said in defeat. “Okaaay... We’ll at least check it ooout...”

“All right!” Dawkson cheered. “I haven’t been this fired up in ages!”

“Thank you, my lady!” added Valentine.

Hero Gold-Hair nodded, satisfied. “We leave at once!” he said.

“We can make some extra cash hunting magic beasts on the way there!”

“That would be a biiiig help,” Tsuya admitted.

“I will scout ahead and look for suitable trap locations,” Riliangiu offered. “Forests are home to large numbers of magic beasts.”

“Thanks, Riliangiu,” said Hero Gold-Hair. “I’m counting on you.”

“Yes, sir! Then, by your leave!” Riliangiu ran ahead with frightening speed. She was gone in an instant.

I see... Dawkson thought as he watched her go. They’re sending out a scout to learn what’s coming, so they can avoid making some kind of mistake... When he had been hunting Zanzibar’s rebellion in the desert, Dawkson had ordered his army to advance based on nothing more than his own guesswork. That was why it had been so easy for Zanzibar to outmaneuver him with guerrilla tactics. Not just the last time either... If I had used scouts during that first big attack on the humans right after I became Dark One, it might not have been such a huge loss for us...

“Hey, Dawkson!” Hero Gold-Hair shouted. “You coming?” Dawkson had been standing still, lost in his thoughts.

“Y-Yeah! Sorry! I’m coming!” Dawkson said, hurrying after the rest of the party. Before long, they had left the town behind them.

◇Meanwhile, in the Sky◇

Phufun’s succubus wings were unfurled to their full span as she streaked along as fast as she could fly. She was scowling in irritation. *Master... Where did you go?* she thought. *I can’t sense his demonic power at all. Could he possibly have turned himself into a human?! Maybe this approach won’t work after all...*

She pressed her glasses up against the bridge of her nose, concealing her anger as well as she could. *I need to find Master Yuigarde as soon as possible and return him to the Dark Citadel. If Zanzibar were to attack us now...*

She beat her wings, speeding back up.

◇Meanwhile, West of the Dark Citadel◇

A group of bats flew through the sky above the vast forest surrounding the Dark Citadel. They left the Citadel individually and flew west, meeting up again a distance away. As they flew, their numbers increased until there was a great cloud of them. A crow—a magic beast of some size—came after them. But the crow couldn’t properly see the bats; the former was flying at a high altitude while the latter were just above the treetops.

Eventually, the bats left the forest belt and entered the desert.

Now that there were no trees to hide them, the crow, who had followed them all this way, descended on the cloud from high up. The bats scattered as fast as they could, but the dire crow was faster. It tore into the bats, felling them until not one remained, and leisurely devoured their bones when they had stopped moving.

When its meal was finished, the dire crow took a look around to make sure it had gotten all of the bats.

And with a mighty “Caw—!” it flew back towards the Dark Citadel.

◇Dark Citadel—Calsi'im's Chambers◇

The dire crow flew in through the window. It fluttered its wings and made its way over to Tia, who was busy cleaning the room.

“Good Sir Caw-lins, where have you been?” she asked. “You mustn't go too far away—you'll make Calsi'im worry!”

The dire crow cried out, “Caw—!” and hopped over to its bed in the corner of the room, brimming with fresh straw that Tia had replaced just a moment ago. It pecked at the straw to make sure everything was in order before hopping over to Tia and nuzzling affectionately against her chest.

“My!” Tia exclaimed. “Good Sir Caw-lins, I've only ever known you to treat Calsi'im like this! Have you grown fond of me as well?”

“Caw—!” Good Sir Caw-lins answered, pressing its head close.

Tia affectionately patted the crow's head. “A lot of demons have left the Dark Citadel, Good Sir Caw-lins...” she said. “But you and I will stick with Calsi'im until the end.”

◇Meanwhile, in the Desert◇

Zanzibar, the head of the rebellion, and his minion Meiden stood on the desert sands, above the secret cave where the fox sisters had made their hidden lair. Meiden was staring out to the east, her neck cocked in confusion.

That's strange... she thought. None of the bats I sent to infiltrate the Dark Citadel have returned... I can't imagine they were found out. I chose bats so that they could blend in with all of the others that nest around there. They should be completely identical. And I sent so many! At least one must have made it...

She stood there late into the night, but no bats ever returned.

Chapter 4: Let's Go to School!

◇Houghtow City—Houghtow College of Magic◇

Flio and Taclyde, the administrator of the Houghtow College of Magic, conversed as they entered an old single-story building.

"Thank you so much for coming all this way, Mister Flio," Taclyde said. "I know you must be busy."

"Not at all!" Flio responded. "I'm honored that you would have me!"

Inside the building was a number of old chairs and tables lined up in the corner, and a section divided off by a rectangular partition. "Well you see," Taclyde said, smirking wryly and scratching the back of his head. "It's about the school store we've been running for our adult students to use. We tried selling food and stationery from a nearby general store, but things haven't been going great..."

Flio looked over the paperwork he had received from Taclyde. "Well, Mister Taclyde," he said. "This request form says...that you want this building renovated into a three-story structure, with the second and third to serve as dormitories?"

"Yes, that's right. I'm sorry to trouble you with this, but we just don't have the time or the money! To be honest, I'm not sure what I'd do if you turned me down..."



Before renovations of the Houghtow College of Magic school store could commence, the school had held an auction for trade companies. Companies had bid, but the Houghtow College of Magic simply lacked the funds necessary for the job. Moreover, it would take all of them a month to finish, but the lower-grades department was going to be opening in half that time. In the end, everyone at the auction left, mumbling about how unreasonable the college was being.

It had taken a long time for Taclyde and the rest of the faculty at the college to scrape together their funds. And now there wasn't enough time.

"Maybe it's impossible..." Taclyde sighed. Then he saw that one person was still there—Flio, participating in the auction as a representative of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store. "Oh, Mister Flio! Now, you don't need to feel obligated just because your children are starting

at our school this spring...and I understand a hundred times over that financially and logistically this is basically impossible, but..."

"Oh, no problem!" Flio said. "We'd be happy to take you up on your offer."



"And you're fine with our plans for the renovations?" Flio asked.

"Yes, of course!" Taclyde said. "Our headmaster approved them. But... Now, I hope this isn't rude of me to ask, but how long will this take? There are a number of students among the incoming lower-grade classes that will need to stay in the dormitories. I would hope you could at least get those floors done as quickly as possible..." He winced apologetically.

Flio just had on his usual easygoing smile. "It'll just take a minute," he said.

"What? A minute? Oh! You mean a month..."

"No, I mean a minute." Flio headed outside the building and turned to face it, raising both his hands. A grand magic circle appeared. He began to chant quietly, and the circle shone brightly and began to revolve.

"I-Incredible!" Taclyde was astounded. "I've been at this college a long time, but I've never seen a magic circle that made me tingle like that!" Then, an array of rough-hewn logs flew out of the magic circle and floated through the air. Taclyde couldn't believe what he was seeing. "Wh-What?!"

Flio pointed casually with his finger, and the logs split, assembling themselves into neat planks. Meanwhile, the old school store also disassembled and started to float. The furniture and sundries that were once inside hung silently in the air.

"That should do it for the demolition," Flio said. "And now we get to building." He began to make fine movements with his fingers. The lumber he had produced assembled in the empty space where the old school store had been. Responding to Flio's gestures, materials piled up here, combined there, or drove themselves into the earth. All sorts of things were happening at an astonishing speed.

"I can hardly believe this...!" Taclyde watched in awe as Flio finally lowered his hands.

"All right," Flio said, resting his chin in his hand. "That should do it."

Taclyde was immobilized with shock. In front of him stood a brand-new three-story building. It took him a moment to come back to himself. "Wh-Wh-What?! It's finished?!"

"I still need to make some small adjustments," Flio said, walking towards the entrance. "And give it a once-over, just to be safe."

“O-Oh!” said Taclyde, hurrying after him. “I see...”



The furniture that had been in the building before was already on the first floor where the new shop was going to be. “The chairs and tables look okay, so I decided to use them as is,” Flio said. “Don’t hesitate to ask if you need any other furniture. I’ll happily build it for you on the spot.” He was completely nonchalant.

Taclyde was still stupefied. “Amazing... You built such a large building in no time at all! And it’s so well made too! I’ve never heard of magic like that before...”

“You haven’t?” Flio asked, his smile stiffening. *Did I overdo it?* he wondered. *If I stand out too much, it might cause trouble for Garyl and Elinásze...* “May I ask a favor, Mister Taclyde?”

“Y-Yes! What is it?”

“Could you keep what I just did here between us? People don’t need to know that I built the building on my own. It was a job for the Fli-o’-Rys General Store, after all. I wouldn’t want too many people talking about me personally, you understand.”

“I see...” Taclyde said. He thought he understood what Flio was thinking. “Right, and your children will be using this building as well. You must be worried about them. All right!” He flashed a thumbs-up. “I’ll tell the parents that all of the store’s magic users came to set it up.”

“Thank you.” Flio breathed a sigh of relief. “That’d be a big help.”



Flio and Taclyde continued their inspection of the building, interior and exterior. Everything was as it had appeared in the plans Flio had presented Taclyde earlier. Not a thing was out of place.

“Thank you so much, Mister Flio,” Taclyde said. “I was worried we wouldn’t be able to open our lower-grades department!”

“Anything for the children,” Flio said, smiling casually. “I’m just happy I could help.” Then something struck him. “Oh, I almost forgot to ask. I heard from Belano that some of her students in the upper-grades department are looking for work.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Taclyde said. “Many people with magical aptitude study here to find jobs related to magic. We have a number of skilled faculty for such a rural school. Why?”

“This is just a thought, but perhaps we could hire some of your adult students for part-time work during the day while the lower-grade classes are in session. From what I’ve heard, the adult classes start in the evening. The daytime is when our store gets busy, and

we've been looking for more staff..."

Taclyde smiled. "Oh! That would be wonderful! From what I've heard, you run a good business. I'd be happy to recommend you to my students."

"Thank you so much! I really appreciate it."

"I've been worried about all those students looking for work! I'll let you know if anyone bites."

"All right. I'll leave it to you, then."

The two smiled and shared a firm handshake, and the construction was complete.

◇One Week Later—Flio's House◇

It was the night before the Houghtow College of Magic lower grades' opening ceremony, and Flio and Rys were in their children's room. It had once been Wyne's private room, but she had insisted on sharing. "I wanna be with Gare-Gare and Eli-Eli! I wanna! I wanna!"

The twins had agreed.

"I would like to share a room with Wyne," Elinàsze had said.

"Me too!" Garyl had said.

And so, the room now belonged to all three.

"H-Hey, mom..." Garyl sulked. "Do I really gotta wear this tomorrow...?"

Rys's mood was the complete opposite of her son's—she had an enormous self-satisfied smile on her face. "That's right, Garyl! You're going to look absolutely precious! I've really outdone myself this time!"

Garyl's clothes were absurd. His shirt had a high collar towering above his head with thick armored pauldrons covering the shoulders. The hem of his pants was preposterously wide. The color scheme was black and purple, and the whole thing exuded a powerful magic energy.

"Hrm..." said Ghozal. "Fine work, Rys! It looks just like the outfit demon royals wear for our coming-of-age ceremony."

"Doesn't it?" Rys gushed, her smile growing even smugger. "I knew you'd recognize it! You were the Dark One, after all! I studied everything I could about how to make this while everyone else was asleep, all in preparation for today! And I do believe I've succeeded!"

Balirossa looked confused. "Ser Uliminas..." she started. "What do you make of that outfit?"

"Meowr." Uliminas cocked her neck. "She did an ameowzing job recreating the traditional demon royal garb...but it's just a bit...I don't know...meowld-fashioned?"

"Do you suppose," Balirossa wondered aloud, "when our own children are born, they will have to wear...that?"

“Not in a mewllion years.”

“Well...” Balirossa sighed. “That is a relief.” The two nodded to each other and shook hands with a knowing grin.

Rys, however, was angry. She stalked up to Uliminas and Balirossa. “Excuse me!” she hissed. “How could you say such a thing in the presence of the ultimate garb, steeped in tradition and infused with power?!” Gone was her usual ladylike disposition. Her fangs were on full display.

Ghozal nodded in agreement. “That’s right. It’s a wonderful recreation! I’d love to have my own children wear it.”

This time it was Balirossa and Uliminas’s turn to snap.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” shouted Balirossa. “I would never allow our child to wear such a thing!”

“Yeah!” agreed Uliminas. “The council of wives will never let mew get away with this!”

“You’re the ones being ridiculous!” Rys said. “How can you not understand how splendid this outfit is?!”

“Yeah!” Ghozal cut in. “We gotta let the humans at the entrance ceremony see how amazing it looks!”

The room had suddenly broken out in debate—Uliminas and Balirossa on one side and Ghozal and Rys on the other—over what Garyl should wear to the entrance ceremony. It looked like it was going to be some time before they reached any kind of conclusion.

What am I supposed to do here? Flio wondered, when suddenly Wyne pulled on his arm.

“Hey, dada?” she said.

“What is it, Wyne?”

“Why does Gare-Gare have to wear that ugly, ugly uniform?”

“What?! What did you say?!” Rys shouted.

“U-Ugly?!” Ghozal bellowed.

Garyl turned to face the two, grimacing. “Mom...” he said. “I know you worked real hard on this...but I don’t want to wear it.”

“You...don’t?” Rys said.

“What are you saying...?” added Ghozal. The two just stared wide-eyed at the boy.

“But...” Garyl went on. “But I really like this belt.” He pointed to the belt, its buckle the shape of the lupine crest.

“Oh, your father made that for you,” Rys said.

“I see!” said Garyl. “Thanks, dad! This one part is really cool!” He was grinning ear to ear, completely unlike the sullen face he had been wearing earlier.

Rys and Ghozal, however, seemed to have been rendered completely immobile.

“Well? What do you think?” Elinàsze did a twirl, making the frilly white skirt of her outfit spin. “Does it suit me?”

Hiya touched their hands to their cheeks. “Splendid,” they said. “You look lovely, O daughter of the Exalted One.”

“It’s adorable, Miss Elinàsze,” said Damalynas.

“Thank you, Mx. Hiya, Miss Damalynas!” Elinàsze curtsied. Just then, Flio made his way down the stairs. “Papa! Look at my outfit!” She ran up to her father, eyes shining. She was so delighted that the jewel on her forehead gleamed with light.

“She truly is splendid,” Hiya said. “I would not think her to be a being of this world...”

“I know, right?” Damalynas agreed. “That smile! It’s entirely too cute!” The pair watched with adoring faces, their hands on their cheeks.

“Look, papa! Aren’t I cute?” Elinàsze asked.

Flio scooped his daughter up and smiled, holding her tight. “Very cute, Elinàsze,” he said.

“Thank you, papa!” she said. “Mama made this for me.”

“Rys did?”

“Yes!” Elinàsze beamed.

Flio took another look at Elinàsze’s outfit. It was white and had ribbons and lace placed strategically to maximize the girl’s cuteness. *If she made such a cute outfit for Elinàsze, Flio wondered, how did Garyl’s end up like that?!*



“Good morning, dad!” Garyl said, running down the stairs. He was wearing an outfit very similar to the adventuring gear Flio liked to wear.

“Garyl, where did you get those clothes?” Flio asked. “I haven’t seen them before.”

“Oh! Mom made them for me!”

“What? Rys did?” Flio looked up the stairs, where Rys stood, weary on her feet. She had dark circles under her eyes.

“I... I did it, my lord husband,” she said. “I made clothes Garyl liked in only one night... Hee hee...”

“R-Rys...” Flio said. “You didn’t have to...”

“No, my lord husband. For the sake of my adorable children, I must. This is the least I can do.” As tired as Rys looked, she was smiling.

Flio held his wife gently and healed her fatigue with recovery magic. “Thank you, Rys,” Flio said. “I really appreciate all your hard

work.”

Rys smiled blissfully in the arms of her husband. The healing magic felt so good, and before she knew it, she was asleep standing up, leaning against Flio’s chest.

We have some time before we need to go to the school, Flio thought. *There’s no harm in letting her sleep a bit...* He picked her up and carried her princess-style to her chair in the living room.

◇Later, at the Houghtow College of Magic◇

A great throng of people had already gathered for the lower-grades entrance ceremony. The new department had plans to teach not only magic, but a curriculum of elementary education as well, including reading and arithmetic. Schools specializing in this sort of education were common in larger cities close to Klyrode Castle, but Houghtow City was far enough away from the capital for this to be somewhat rare. Thus, many families wanted to send their children to be educated here.

Among the crowd who had come to the lecture hall for the ceremony was a particular young girl. She was small, dressed in a black gothic lolita dress, and holding a large plush black cat under her arm. Alongside her was another girl, who seemed to be her older sister. She was wearing glasses over her youthful face and, in contrast to her sister, a white gothic lolita dress.

The girl in black turned her plush cat to face her sister. Its mouth opened and closed as the girl’s voice came out—her own mouth didn’t move at all. “Irystiel can manage on her own, darling Belianna.”

Her older sister—Belianna—tisked with irritation. Despite her saccharine appearance, she seemed to be in a bad mood. “Irystiel,” she said, “would you cut it out with the damned ventriloquist act?”

“It isn’t ventriloquism!” Irystiel’s plush cat insisted. “I keep telling you: Kitty speaks with the voice of Irystiel’s heart!” Apparently, she was going to keep using a proxy to speak.

Belianna clicked her tongue and leaned forward to whisper into Irystiel’s ear. “Are you sure you’ll be all right in this damned human school?” she asked. “I may have a different mother from you, but our father is the same, and all our parents are dead and gone anyway. All we have in this damned world is each other. I’m seriously worried about you, Irystiel.”

Yes! This was indeed *the* Belianna who aspired to the Infernal Four! Her sister Irystiel was related to her through her father, but while Belianna was a full devil, Irystiel’s mother was a human woman. Under law, those with human blood were not to reside within territory controlled by the Dark Army. That was why she was looking after her here, in this provincial human city. She was in her human form, so

nobody noticed her presence.

Irystiel listened, and then pushed her plush cat in front of Belianna's face to speak. "Everything will be okay, sister. There is a dormitory for us to live in, and the school will be there to look after us if something were to happen. So please, don't worry about us and just keep doing your best at work." She pressed the cat's lips up against her sister's face with a "smooch!"

"Y-You cut that out!" Belianna stammered, blushing. "A-Anyway, I'll be back in a damned minute. Your big sis has to head to the guardians' seating."

As Belianna marched off, Irystiel took one of the plush cat's arms in her own hand, waving it bye-bye.



Salina, a human girl, was lined up with all the other new students here for the entrance ceremony. She sighed. *How droll... she thought. Why must I attend such a school in the middle of nowhere like this?* She looked around at her prospective classmates. *Everyone here is a child too... With such young peers, there's simply no way this will amount to anything more than a years-long waste of time. My grand scheme to woo some noble heir and snag a husband has been thwarted before it could even begin! Oh, how I had been looking forward to a whirlwind romance...*

She sighed again as she slowly took her seat. In front of her, a small-bodied woman who seemed to be a teacher was directing the children here and there.

If only there were some handsome youth here with a gentle smile and prospects for his future! But alas, in this provincial school, there could never be such a—

Salina stopped dead in her tracks. The boy the small teacher was currently directing had caught her eye. Or more accurately, she couldn't take her eyes off him. Her heart began to beat faster. Blush crept into her cheeks as she stared agape.

I can sense his future prospects from here! she thought. His smile is practically blinding! He's perfect!

Looking all around, the handsome boy made his way over to the seat next to hers. "Found it! Here's my seat!" he said, plopping himself down.

Salina's brain was screaming at her. *Pretty boy alert! There's a pretty boy right next to me!!!*

The boy turned to look at her, and she met his gaze. He smiled—oh so gently—and held out his hand for her to shake. "I'm Gary!" he said. "Nice to meetcha!"

"S-Salina..." she mumbled, her face bright red as she squeezed Gary's hand. "I-It's nice to meet you too..." *O-O-Oh no, my heart's*

beating too loudly! I can barely speak! I must be acting like a complete weirdo! She was starting to foam at the mouth.

“Hi, Salina!” Garyl said. “I guess we’re gonna be in the same class!”

Wha?! Salina stared at him, captivated by his cheerful voice and his impossibly bright smile. Her heart felt like it was going to burst out from her chest. This must be it! she thought. Destiny at work! Surely, I was born to meet this boy! I just know it! Lord...Garyl, was it? I shall devote my whole life to you!



Sitting ahead of Garyl in the front row was his sister Elinàsze. With her chestnut hair done up adorably with orange ribbons, her cuteness was leaps and bounds ahead of the rest. Her classmates, boys and girls alike, found their gazes unconsciously drawn to her, unable to look away. It was a curious sight, and the guardians were beginning to take notice.

Flio, who was sitting with the other guardians, grimaced. *Oh no...* he thought. *I knew Elinàsze was cute, but I didn't think she would be this much of a distraction for her classmates!* He turned to where Rys was sitting beside him.

Rys was not wearing her usual white dress, but a different dress with long slits exposing her cleavage and her back. She was wearing heavier makeup than usual too, with deep eye shadow accentuating her almond eyes. She was beautiful enough that even Flio, who got to spend every day with her, felt his heart skip a beat. *Strange...* he thought. *We came here together! Why would I be so suddenly taken by her now?*

For her part, Rys’s attention was fixed intently on their children. As for Flio, he felt his face growing pink as he looked at her.



Before long, the entrance ceremony had begun. The headmaster, a somewhat heavysset woman with neat hair and a well-tailored outfit, made the introductions. “Hello, everyone, and welcome to our new lower-grades school! I am Blanquette, the headmaster of this institution...”

Blanquette went on to introduce the head teachers. The student body was divided into three classes, with twenty students per class for a total of sixty. Elinàsze and Garyl were in Class A, taught by Belano.

Belano ascended the stage to introduce herself. “H-H-H-H-Hi...” she stammered. “M-My name is Belano. L-L-Let’s all g-get a—
GACK!!!”

Belano had always been shy, and on top of that, she was being watched by a huge crowd of students and their families. Her stuttering had gotten so bad that she had chomped down hard on her tongue, loudly enough for the entire lecture hall to hear. She hastily bowed and lowered her head, and everyone in the hall gave her a round of fond applause.

Finally, Taclyde delivered a message from the administration regarding the new school store and dormitory. Those who wished to lodge in the dorm should go to the administrative office along with their guardian once the individual classes' first homeroom had been concluded. It was really a message for the guardians more than the students.

"And finally," Taclyde continued, "I would like to thank everyone at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store for their work building our new dormitories and for their agreement to help run our school store from now on. They worked hard to make sure everything was ready in time for the entrance ceremony. I believe the children of the store's proprietor will be starting school themselves this semester. If I'm not mistaken, he's sitting with the other guardians right now! Let's have a round of applause for Mister Flio!"

The crowd dutifully began to clap, but Flio was sitting in his chair with his head down.

"Perhaps you should stand, my lord husband?" Rys said.

With his wife's encouragement, Flio took to his feet. "Ah... Thank you...!" he said, bowing all around. "Thank you very much!"

◇Houghtow City—The Fli-o'-Rys General Store◇

While the Houghtow College of Magic was holding its entrance ceremony, Balirossa was back at the store, muttering to herself as she stocked the shelves. "I suppose little Elinàsze and Garyl are at the entrance ceremony right now..."

Uliminas leaned in to whisper in Balirossa's ear. "Are mew jealous too?" she asked. "Ah... I can't wait until it's *meowr* kittens going off to school..."

"I-I suppose," Balirossa said. "In truth, I was thinking the same thing..."

The two turned their gazes towards the store entrance, where Ghozal was standing on guard duty. Even as a guard, Ghozal's physique was imposing enough to frighten customers, so they kept his presence hidden with magic. On the rare occasion they had trouble with a customer, he would lower the magic and sternly say, "Hrm. What do you think you're doing?"

That was all it took to settle problem customers. Rumors had spread all throughout Houghtow that if you tried to rob or start a

scene in the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, an enormous man would appear out of nowhere and catch you. It had been a long time since anyone had tried anything, but Ghozal was always there, watching with his keen eyes.

Ghozal noticed Balirossa and Uliminas staring at him. "Hrm?" he said, dispelling his Concealment spell and walking up to them. "Is something wrong?"

The two hadn't been expecting Ghozal's sudden appearance. They both began to blush.

"Well, not exactly..." said Balirossa. *I can't tell him I want a child in the middle of work!*

"It's mewre like there's something we *want*..." said Uliminas. *Don't make me say it!*

Ghozal looked between his two mumbling wives. "Hrm? What's the matter? Staring at me like that and mumbling to yourselves... What's gotten into you two today?"

"Oh," said Balirossa. "I *do* wish you would *think* a little, Sir Ghozal..."

"Fur sure..." said Uliminas. "Mew're such a blockhead sometimes!"

"Hrm? I don't get it. Can you tell me what this is about?" He cocked his head, more uncertain than ever what the blushing women in front of him were on about.



◇Houghtow College of Magic—A Hallway◇

After the entrance ceremony, the homeroom teachers led the students to their classrooms, guardians following along behind. *Huh...* Belianna thought as she watched Flio from behind as they walked. *So that's the damned proprietor of the store that built the dormitory...* Her sister Irystiel was in Class A, along with Flio's children. *Irystiel wouldn't be able to go to school safely like this if it weren't for that damned dormitory. I suppose I damned well ought to thank him...*

But as soon as she thought about approaching him, her body went stiff. It almost felt like fear. *Wh-What is this damned feeling?* she thought. *Am I...afraid?* Her body shaking, she looked around to see the woman next to Flio glaring at her with a look of murderous hostility. *O-Oh, come on,* she chided herself. *Am I letting this damned woman get under my skin?* She tried to steel herself but simply couldn't stop her body from shaking.

"Rys, what's wrong?" Flio asked, noticing her behavior.

Rys finally turned her gaze away from Belianna to look at her husband. "Oh..." she said. "Nothing of any note." But she brought her lips up close to whisper in Flio's ear. "A demon woman in human form was looking at you, my lord husband. I suppose it put me a little on guard..."

"Ah!" Flio exclaimed just loudly enough for only Rys to hear him. "I don't think there's any need to worry about her. She seems like a kind person who loves her little sister." He gave her one of his carefree smiles.

"Oh? You know of her, my lord husband?"

"Yes. Well, I've met her once. Or, rather, the Wolf of Justice did. I don't think she's noticed who I am..."

"The Wolf of Justice..." Rys muttered. "Th-Then...is she, perhaps, the woman from the hot springs...?"

The two kept on talking as the group made their way to the classroom. Meanwhile, behind them, Belianna heaved a powerful sigh. Rys's killer glare had left her whole body drenched in cold sweat, and she was still shaking slightly. *That woman is something else...* she thought. *She looks like a normal damned demihuman, but that bloodlust...! Damn! I need more training...*

Belianna smacked her own cheeks and tried to refocus.

◇Houghtow College of Magic—Class A◇

The students reached their classroom and sat down at their brand-new desks. They had been assigned seats to start out with based on

the order of height, putting little Elinàsze in the front row, and Garyl, who was tall for a humanoid child, all the way in the back.

The guardians watched from the back of the room. Flio and Rys found themselves right behind Garyl. “And I thought our Garyl had gotten big...” Flio marveled as he looked around. “I suppose the children of different species come in all different sizes!”

Next to Garyl was a rukh—a great bird, large even by the standards of demihumans. Garyl was a whole head taller than the next tallest humanoid student in the class, but the rukh was another head taller still.

“It’s no surprise,” Rys said. “An adult rukh or giant could be ten feet or taller! Look—some of the children’s guardians are too big to fit in the classroom. They have to watch through the window!”

Rys pointed out the window, where, just as she said, a number of giants and rukhs were watching the proceedings. The classroom was on the second floor, so they could just stand up straight and look in.

Flio smiled looking at the happy faces of the large-bodied guardians outside, but suddenly a worried look crossed his face. *Hm?* he thought. *Behind that rukh parent... Is that...?* He looked and saw...

“Wyne...” A small girl’s head was poking out, peering into the classroom. “So you came after all...” Flio smirked.

Earlier that day, Wyne had had a conniption. “No faaair!” she wailed. “I wanna go to Gare-Gare and Eli-Eli’s ceremony!”

“Wyne,” Flio explained, over and over again, “I’m really sorry. The school only has enough room for two people from each family. They can’t make an exception for everyone.”

Finally, Wyne had relented and agreed to stay home—although she didn’t stop pouting. “Hmph. Fine, fine. I’ll just go play with Sy-Sy, then...”

Yet here she was, her wyvern wings poking out behind a rukh’s back as she skillfully kept herself hovering in their shadow. She was watching Elinàsze and Garyl with a look of joy on her face.

“Oh, that Wyne...” Rys noticed Wyne’s presence not long after Flio had. She covered her mouth with her hand. “What should we do, my lord husband?”

“Hmm...” Flio thought. “She’s just watching, I suppose. As long as she doesn’t make any trouble, I’d just as soon pretend I didn’t see her.”

“Very well.” Rys smirked and nodded.

For her part, Wyne seemed to think she had gotten away unnoticed. She kept on watching, poking her head out from her hiding spot again and again.





After everyone's introductions were finished, the faculty and guardians went together to another room, leaving the students alone in the classroom. A girl walked up to Garyl. "Excuse me...my lord?" It was Salina, who had sat next to him during the opening ceremony.

"Oh, Salina!" Garyl exclaimed. "What's up?"

"Oh! It's just...how to put it..." Salina began to turn red, pressing her cheeks with her hands as she smiled bashfully. "I thought, perhaps, it would be nice to talk about our plans together..."

"Huh?" Garyl was confused. "What do you mean, our plans together?"

"Well... I figured we could start as friends," she said, choosing her words very deliberately. "And then..." Her blush grew deeper.

"Hey, Salina!" a boy butted in suddenly. "Whatcha talkin' about with this weirdo here?"

Salina glanced at the boy. Her warm smile vanished, replaced instantly with a look of utter revulsion. "Sadjitta," she spat, "you are interrupting my pleasant conversation with Lord Garyl. Go away." She made a shooing gesture with her hand.

"Hey!" Sadjitta shot back. "You don't gotta be so mean! I'm your fiancé!"

"Excuse me?!" Salina said. "How dare you bring up that ridiculous promise our parents made, just because *they* get along with *each other*. I'll have you know that I don't like you *one bit*!"

"Wh-What?!"

"You heard me!"

The two pressed their heads close to each other, glaring daggers. For a while, Garyl didn't know what to do. But then he flashed a great big smile. "You two seem like you really get along!" he said. "This must be what my dad meant when he told me about lovers' quarrels!"

"N-No!" Sadjitta said, blushing. "W-Well, maybe..."

Salina, on the other hand, was firm in her denial. "My lord, please! You mustn't misunderstand! I truly do hate Sadjitta! Please don't say such things about us!"

"What are you saying, Salina...?" Sadjitta moaned. "What's so great about *this* boy, anyway?"

"Well, to begin with, he's tall! And he's handsome, and his smile is so lovely... I looked over every boy in the entrance ceremony to try to find one I might like to marry, and it simply *must* be my lord Garyl!"

"N-No way..." said Sadjitta. "How could you say that to my face...?" He ran his fingers through his hair, trying to look unaffected. But his tortured expression was plain to see.

Garyl stepped in the middle before the two could start tearing each other's faces off. "Hey, hey," he said. "Let's play nice, okay? We're here to learn, right? As classmates?"

"Oh, well..." Salina stepped down. "If you say so, my lord..." *Ahhh! she rhapsodized internally. Lord Garyl's illustrious face is so close to mine! I could just faint!*

Salina... Sadjitta puffed out his cheeks. *You're losing it just 'cause this boy's in your face, aren't you...?* "I'll step down this time, Garyl..." he said. "But remember this—I won't let you have Salina!" He pointed menacingly.

"Okay!" said Garyl, grinning as bright as always. He took the hand Sadjitta had pointed at him and shook it, half by force. "It's nice to meetcha, Sadjitta!"

"This is all out of whack..." Sadjitta muttered as he returned to his seat, impromptu handshake concluded.

Then, Elinàsze walked up to Garyl, standing right in the spot Sadjitta had just left. "What were you and Sadjitta talking about, Garyl?" she asked.

"Huh?" Garyl said. "Oh, just, you know. I was just saying it would be nice to be friends!"

"Oh," Elinàsze said with a smile. "That's nice."

"No!" said Sadjitta, suddenly reappearing. "I was saying that I wasn't going to lose to you! Not at classes, not at sports, and not at magic!" *And then...* he thought, *Salina will love me!* He was burning up with passion!

But Garyl just kept grinning. "Yeah!" he said. "I'm gonna do my best too! Let's give it our all!" He took Sadjitta's hand again and shook it more forcefully this time.

"N-No! I— Wait!" Sadjitta stuttered. Garyl had thrown him completely off his groove. "How come you're such a weirdo...?"

Elinàsze interrupted his train of thought, popping out in front of his face. "Hello, Sadjitta!" she said. "I'm Garyl's older twin sister, Elinàsze. I do hope you get along with my little brother."

Wh-Whoa... Sadjitta thought. *She's c-cute...* "O-Oh!" he said aloud, avoiding Elinàsze's gaze as he spoke. "Y-Yes! We're classmates, after all..."

The others in the class were gossiping as they watched the scene unfold. "Ha ha! Salina's 'fiancé' is lookin' at Elinàsze's face and *blushing!*"

"What a skirt-chaser..."

"Sh-Shut up..." Sadjitta muttered darkly as he returned to his own seat. "Who cares..."

"Garyl," said Elinàsze, "make sure you get along well with Sadjitta."

“Okay!” Garyl cheerfully responded. “I will!”

Garyl and Elinàsze seemed to have caught the eye of the class. Before long, they were surrounded by other students.

“Hey, Garyl!” said one. “I’m Reptor, a lizardfolk! Nice to meetcha!”

“H-Hello, Elinàsze...” said another. “My name is Leina Raina. Would you like to be friends?”

The two greeted all their classmates with a smile and an “It’s nice to meet you!” or a “How do you do?” Before long, everyone was engaged in lively conversation.

Irystiel was sitting in the front row—a ways apart from the chattering circle of kids. She was gazing vacantly out into the hallway, not making any movement to join the conversation, her big black plush cat held tight to her chest.

“Hey,” someone said from behind her. “That’s a cute plush!”

Irystiel whipped around in surprise to see Garyl. She covered her face with the plush cat. “Is there something you need?” she asked, speaking through the cat as always.

As a half-devil, Irystiel had been treated coldly by others since she was very young. Her ventriloquism was something she had adopted as a form of self-protection. She used her black plush cat to speak in her place so that she herself would not have to be hurt by unkind words. But this had only led other children to call her strange and distance themselves from her. Nobody ever wanted to play along.

“Wow!” Garyl gushed. “It even talks! That’s so cool!”

Irystiel peeked out from behind the plush to see the boy’s beaming smile. “Do you think I’m strange?” the plush asked.

“Strange? Not really. My sister has a *huge* stuffed animal at home!”

“Garyl!” Elinàsze ran up, turning pink. “You promised to keep that a secret!”

“Oh...oops! That’s right!” Garyl stuck his tongue out at his sister.

“Ehe hee...” Irystiel giggled, with her own voice this time. Noticing she had let her voice slip, she clapped a hand over her mouth. *What was that?* she thought. *I just laughed without using Kitty!*

Garyl turned back to Irystiel. “So...” he said, grinning. “I just thought, since we’re classmates and all...do you wanna join in with everyone? Your kitty can come too!”

Irystiel slowly poked her head out from behind the plush. It took her a long time to say anything, but finally she found the words. “Irystiel says she’ll talk if you’re sure you really want to...” the plush said. She slowly stood up from her seat.

“Okay! Great to have you!” said Garyl.

Irystiel poked her head out again. It was obvious to everyone that

a blush was creeping in under her pale skin.



Belano, the homeroom teacher, returned to the classroom to hand out their schedules for the next day of school and some simple rules, and finished class for the day. Garyl and Elinàsze left the classroom to where the guardians for Class A were waiting in the hallway.

“Dad! Mom!” said Garyl, running up as he spotted Flio and Rys in the crowd.

“Papa! Mama!” said Elinàsze as she ran after, smiling.

Flio gave them both a big hug. “Great job today, both of you. I suppose it’s time to go home now. Are you ready to head back?”

“Yeah!” both twins cried.

All around them, their classmates were meeting up with their respective guardians. Many of them said goodbye to the two on their way out.

“Catch ya later, Garyl!”

“See you tomorrow, Elinàsze!”

The two said their goodbyes and their see-you-laters as Flio watched happily. “It looks like you made lots of friends already,” he said.

“Yeah!” said Garyl. “It was lots of fun!”

“Yes,” Elinàsze agreed. “I had a wonderful time.”

“Why don’t you tell me all about your new friends on the way home?” Flio proposed.

“Sure, okay!” said Garyl.

“I’d love to, papa!” said Elinàsze.

The four of them, including Rys, held hands merrily all the way home.

◇A Room in the Dormitory◇

After school, the students staying at the dormitory had another short meeting in the newly built dormitory building itself, where they were assigned their rooms.

“Now, let’s see...” said Taclyde. “Miss Irystiel’s room is number 306.” He led Irystiel to her room as she clutched her plush cat close. The students at the dormitory only had a single room each, but at least the individual rooms were fairly big. They had a high bed with a writing desk in the space beneath that the students could use for studying. There was a closet in each room too for storing the students’ personal belongings.

“What about the damned food?” Belianna asked.

“The store on the first floor serves three meals a day,” said

Taclyde. "Please let the staff know by noon the day before if you're going to be eating out or returning home on your days off."

"All right then," Belianna responded, nodding her head.

Meanwhile, Irystiel was glancing all over the room, occasionally nodding to herself as she checked everywhere, up and down. Then, she jogged up to Taclyde and Belianna and held her plush cat in front of her face to speak. "Irystiel says she likes this room."

Taclyde smiled. "I see!" he said. "Glad to hear it!" His explanation finished, Taclyde moved on to help the next student into their room next door.

Now alone in the room together, Belianna brought her face right up close to Irystiel's. "Say, Irystiel..." she said. "Are you sure about using the plush to speak? Isn't that going to make it damned hard to make friends with your classmates?"

But Irystiel shook her head and held the cat in front of Belianna's face. "It won't be a problem," it said. "We made a friend. He said our plush was cute." She fondly remembered Garyl's kind smile.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Belianna smiled happily. "Damned lucky there was such a weirdo in the class. I never thought I'd hear you say you made a *friend*, Irystiel."

Friend.

Irystiel had said that word without thinking. She didn't realize until her sister echoed it back to her. Embarrassed, she hid her face behind her plush and blushed red.

◇Houghtow City—Main Street◇

A carriage clattered along the main street of Houghtow City, carrying Salina along. Sitting across from her was the head maid, who had come to the entrance ceremony today to serve as her guardian. Salina's parents were some of the most influential merchants in Houghtow. They had done business with Klyrode Castle for many years, and Salina was accustomed to receiving special treatment wherever she went as if she were nobility herself.

But it wasn't all sunshine and roses. Her parents' work took them all over the kingdom and kept them horribly busy. They had left the task of raising their daughter mainly to their head maid.

"Milady," the maid said, "your lord father sent you a message of congratulations."

"I see!" Salina said, smiling. "I'll look at it when we get home."

The head maid smiled back, pleased to see Salina in a good mood. "Did you have a good day at school, milady?" she asked.

"Yes, I had a wonderful day!" Salina said. "How could you tell?" She tilted her head in curiosity.

"Come now," said the maid. "I've known you since you were *thiiiis*

little, milady.” She gestured with her hands. “But it has been a long time since I’ve seen you in such high spirits.”

“Hm...” Salina considered, smiling as she looked out the window. “Yes, I suppose you’re right.” *Lord Garyl... she thought. Ah, the wheels of fate have finally begun to turn...*

Oh dear, the head maid thought. Milady Salina is head over heels again, isn’t she? I wonder who it is this time... One of her teachers? A classmate of hers? No, probably not that. She’s far too precocious to fall for a boy her own age...

◇Flio’s House—Evening◇

“We’re home!” Flio announced as he led the group back into the house. Sybe, in its unicorn rabbit form, came snuffling up and jumped into Flio’s arms. “Good to see you, Sybe,” Flio said, petting it gently on the head. “Thank you for holding down the fort.” Sybe looked blissfully happy.

“Dada! Mama! Eli-Eli! Gare-Gare! Welcome home!” Wyne came thundering down the stairs, a big smile on her face. “Ah!” she exclaimed when she saw Flio praising Sybe. “Me too, dada! I was a good girl and held down the fort too! Pick me up too! Praise me! Praise *me*!” She ran up in front of him and spread her arms wide.

Flio and Rys couldn’t help smirking at those words. “That Wyne...” Rys whispered. “She thinks she got away with it.”

“Well, she must have been worried about her brother and sister,” said Flio. “Perhaps we can let it slide this time.”

“Dada!” Wyne repeated. “Pick me up! Me too!”

“Okay, okay,” Flio said, putting down Sybe and spreading his arms wide. “Go ahead, Wyne.”

“Yay!” Wyne beamed and jumped into Flio’s arms. “I love you, dada!” She draped her arms around his shoulders and quivered as she rubbed her cheeks against his. Flio pet her fondly on the head.

“Papa, I want a turn!” said Elinàsze. “I would like to be picked up too, please!”

Flio turned towards Elinàsze with his usual easygoing expression. “Of course, Elinàsze,” he said. “After Wyne’s had her turn.”

“All right, papa...” Elinàsze said. “Please do hurry up, Wyne!”

“Aha ha!” Wyne laughed. “More! More!”

Garyl, Rys, and Sybe watched on merrily as the two girls clamored over their father.

Chapter 5: Dark Regent Calsi'im

◇In the Desert◇

Zanzibar had spent yet another sleepless night in the desert cave the Shadow King's people were offering them as a hideout. It had already been weeks since he had ordered his minion Meiden to investigate the state of affairs in the Dark Citadel, but no news had reached them and Zanzibar was growing angry.

"Master!" Meiden ran up, holding one of her bat familiars in her arms.

"Meiden! Do we have news at last?"

"Yes, Master! One of the bats I sent to infiltrate the Dark Citadel has finally returned! And listen to this: not only has the Dark One Yuigarde left the Dark Citadel, but the Infernals Yorminyt and Hugi-Mugi have abandoned the Dark Army! Even Phufun, Yuigarde's right hand, has left to go find her master!"

"Then...who is in charge of the Dark Citadel right now?" Zanzibar asked.

"It seems, Master, that the last remaining Infernal, Calsi'im, has been made Dark Regent."

"Calsi'im!" Zanzibar bit his lip in aggravation. Calsi'im had thwarted him once before when he had attempted a surprise assault on the Dark Citadel. Calsi'im and his skeletons had holed up in the throne room and resisted Zanzibar's forces to the last.

"Even *hearing* that accursed skeleton's name makes me sick," Zanzibar spat. "If it weren't for him, we would have claimed the Dark Citadel long ago! Still, with Yuigarde, Yorminyt, and Hugi-Mugi all gone, the Dark Army must be on its last legs. This may be our best opportunity to attack." He took to his feet and jogged towards the entrance. "Meiden! Give everyone here the order to attack! And make sure to let the Shadow King know we will need supplies."

"As you command, Master. It will be done at once," Meiden said, kneeling before Zanzibar.

Zanzibar grinned wickedly. The moment of his triumph was at hand!

◇Days Later—Dark Citadel Throne Room◇

The Dark Regent Calsi'im sat in the throne room of the Dark

Citadel. He didn't sit on the throne, but in front of it, on a cloth he had spread out over the ground. As he sat, his minion Tia stepped up to him.

"Calsi'im," she said, handing him a cup of tea from the tray she was carrying, "you may only be regent, but you are still the lord of this citadel. Perhaps it would be best for you to sit on the throne?"

"No, no!" Calsi'im said, accepting the cup. "I am simply holding on to this office until the Dark One Yuigarde returns! I would never so much as *think* to put on such airs!" He laughed, his jawbone rattling in his skull.

Tia looked at the stacks of paperwork Calsi'im had sitting in front of him. "Is that the overview of the Dark Army's current fighting strength I prepared for you?"

"Indeed it is!" Calsi'im said, looking over the papers as he sipped his tea. "Things are even worse than I feared, Tia..."

"It is very bad..." Tia folded her arms. Ordinarily, magic dolls didn't express emotions, but Tia's distress was plain to see on her face. "I wouldn't be surprised if the Dark Army collapses entirely, to be honest..."

Calsi'im took another look at the papers in front of him, which read:

Total Dark Army Fighting Strength (Excluding Noncombatants):

◇Infernal Candidate Belianna: 1

◇Skeletons Loyal to Calsi'im: 21

◇Devils Loyal to Belianna: 298

"My loyal skeletons..." Calsi'im mused. "Those would be the old guards of the Dark Citadel, would they not?"

"You are correct, Calsi'im," Tia answered. "They included themselves as combatants due to their high level of motivation, but it would perhaps be best not to expect much of them..."

"Hogwash!" Calsi'im declared, his jaw rattling with laughter. "Why, last time Zanzibar tried to attack while the Dark One was away, it was those very skeletons who helped me send them packing! There's not a weak bone in their bodies!" But he had to admit to himself that things did indeed look bleak.

Still, Tia is right, he thought. The Dark Army really is on the verge of collapse. Those skeletons are all as old as me! Any of our bodies could give out at any time. And Belianna's devils are all youngsters dissatisfied with Zanzibar's way of doing things! It would be absurd to ask them to throw their lives away.

"Calsi'im..." Tia squeezed the skeleton's hands in hers. "If Zanzibar's rebels come to attack us now, we are doomed," she said. "You were only able to drive them away last time because the Dark

One Yuigarde returned to the Dark Citadel at the last moment. But I do not believe the Dark One will return this time. Zanzibar would simply slaughter you..." She hugged Calsi'im tight. "Calsi'im, we must flee. There is still time! The two of us can go somewhere far away!"

"Tia..." said Calsi'im. "Thank you for your concern, but I cannot. Phufun is counting on me! Don't get me wrong; I don't plan on dying anytime soon! But I would never shirk my responsibility. If I ran away now, what would I say to the Dark Ones of ages past?!"

"Calsi'im..." Tia still looked worried.

Calsi'im placed his hands on Tia's shoulders when suddenly his familiar, Good Sir Caw-lins the dire crow, came bursting into the throne room, noisily flapping its wings. It hardly ever went inside any rooms other than Calsi'im's chambers—this was a real cause for concern.

"Goodness gracious me!" Calsi'im exclaimed. "What seems to be the trouble?"

Good Sir Caw-lins hurried up to Calsi'im and began to caw. "Caw! Caw caw caw! Caaaw—!"

Calsi'im started to tremble at what he heard. "It can't be! Zanzibar's resistance has left the desert and begun marching on the Dark Citadel?!"

Tia's eyes went wide. She covered her hand with her mouth. "C-Calsi'im..." For a while, Calsi'im sat perfectly still. Then, slowly, he turned to look at her. Tia sidled up to her master. "There isn't a moment to lose!" she pleaded. "We must get on Good Sir Caw-lins's back and fly to safety!" Good Sir Caw-lins nodded his fervent agreement.

Calsi'im looked between the doll and the bird before clearing his throat. "Don't fret, now," he said. "I can't promise everything will be okay, but there is still something we can do. We can run away if it goes badly, but first I want to try my idea!"

"You have an idea?" Tia asked. "There's still something we can do, even now?"

"Hmm..." Calsi'im said. "It is a bit of a long shot, I'm afraid..." He took a piece of paper from one of his robe's pockets.

"What is that?" Tia asked.

"Right now, it's our last hope!" Calsi'im exclaimed. "Now," he said to the crow, "I'm terribly sorry, but there is somewhere I need to be carried." Good Sir Caw-lins lowered his head, and Calsi'im climbed onto his back.

"Calsi'im, please let me go with you!" said Tia, climbing on after him.

When he was sure the two were safe and secure, Good Sir Caw-lins let out a mighty "Caw—!"

“Now, the destination...” Calsi’im began, and told Gold Sir Caw-lins where they needed to go. The crow nodded and took to the sky, leaving the empty throne room behind them.

◇The Forest North of the Dark Citadel◇

Dawkson stood in a forest a ways north of the Dark Citadel. He had passed this way by chance on his journey with Hero Gold-Hair and the girls.

The Dark Citadel hasn’t changed... thought Dawkson, watching from afar. He was disguised in his human form, and on top of that, he was wearing a heavy cloak with its hood low over his face. Looking at him, nobody would think that he was the Dark One Yuigarde.

“What’s the matter, Dawkson?” came Hero Gold-Hair’s voice. Dawkson turned to see the man himself, accompanied by Tsuya and Valentine.

“N-Nothing at all, Blondie! Y-Yeah! Everything’s good!”

“Are you sure?” Hero Gold-Hair asked. “Well, if I’m imagining it, that’s all well and good. But if something’s on your mind, you can always talk to me! We’re all on this journey together. As far as I’m concerned, that makes you as good as family.”

“Family...” The word made Dawkson think of Gholl, his older half brother. *What the hell have I been doing?! he thought. I haven’t done a single worthwhile thing since taking the throne from my brother! I just used force to get my way all the time. I ran around with no plan, screaming at demons... Compared to Gholl, I’m like dirt. I was a lousy Dark One...*

“Hey, Dawkson!” called Hero Gold-Hair, grabbing his attention. “You just told me nothing’s the matter, but now you’re right back to brooding!”

“A-Ah! No, no...” Dawkson insisted. “It’s nothing, really. It’s just suddenly hittin’ me that my whole life’s been a failure. I wish I was more like you, Blondie. Seems like there’s nothin’ you can’t do...”

“What are you saying, Dawkson? I’ve had all *kinds* of failures!”

“Y-You have?! But you have Tsuya and Valentine and Riliangiu all doing whatever you say! And you take care of them! You set traps to get money to support them and stuff, right?”

“Of course I do!” Hero Gold-Hair took Dawkson by the shoulders and turned him to look him in the eyes. “You know...” he started. “I was summoned here from another world to be the Hero, but no matter how hard I trained, my abilities just wouldn’t go up! But I was too trapped in my selfish pride to admit to anyone what was happening. I even tried to summon a djinn the Magical Kingdom had sealed away to gain power! But everything went wrong, and now I’m an internationally wanted criminal.”

“R-Really? That’s...”

“But we can’t dwell on our past failures! We have to keep moving forward! What’s done is done. But if we try, we can pay back the debt we owe for the trouble we caused, a little at a time.” Gold-Hair chuckled, embarrassed. “Well! That turned into a bit of a speech. All I mean is, I’m going to live in the present and keep giving it my all, every day.”

Dawkson could only stare.

Riliangiu appeared, returning from the forest. “Sir, I have identified several locations ahead suitable for traps.”

“Good job!” Hero Gold-Hair said, taking the Drilldozer Shovel from the Bottomless Bag on his belt. “Then I’ll go on ahead and dig the pitfalls! The human Adventurers’ Association will pay top dollar for bounties from inside the Dark Army’s territory!”

I see... Dawkson thought as Hero Gold-Hair walked off. Even if I’ve messed up, I can keep moving forward. And maybe someday I can make it up to the people I hurt...

◇The Western Desert◇

The rebel army marched for the Dark Citadel with Zanzibar at its head riding in a resplendent war chariot.

“Meiden,” Zanzibar said. “How are our supply lines? I would hate to make the same mistake as Yuigarde and end up stranded without supplies in the middle of the desert.”

“There is no need to worry, Master,” Meiden replied. “My bats tell me all that transpires. The Dark Army has no forces in range to threaten our supplies.”

Zanzibar nodded, satisfied. “Ha ha ha! I suppose it was worth allying with the Shadow King and the demon fox sisters after all! They certainly know how to run a business.”

Meiden looked at him with a worried expression. “But Master...” she said. “Their fee was simply exorbitant! I cannot help but feel that they are taking advantage of us...”

“No matter. We’ll pay them when they come to collect—or we’ll have it sent from one of our hidden treasure stashes if we don’t have the money on hand. And when I am Dark One, the Shadow King will pay *me* tribute! We will receive our money back with interest!” Zanzibar laughed and led his army—ten thousand strong—eastwards.

◇Phufun, Meanwhile...◇

Phufun alighted and adjusted her glasses. “Where...am I?”

“Hm?” replied the small dark-skinned girl who happened to be in the area. “This is the Calgosi Coast, right?”

“The Calgosi Coast...” Phufun repeated. “That’s a ways south of

the Magical Kingdom, is it not?"

"That's right," the girl said. "I haven't seen you before. You're new here, right?"

"I am. I'm looking for someone. He would be a huge, imposing man about this tall..."

"Heh." The girl smirked. "Does he have long white hair and a long white beard?"

"No, he isn't old..."

"In that case, I haven't seen 'em."

"I see. Thank you for your time, miss." Phufun raised her arms and then brought them sharply down, manifesting her wings. She flew into the sky and took off again at top speed. *Master Yuigarde, where could you be?* she thought, the agitation plain to see on her face. *If you don't come back soon, the Dark Army... It... It might...*

The girl watched in amazement as Phufun streaked off and vanished into the clouds. "Jeez!" she said. "That girl flies pretty fast, right?"

"Oh?" A large man with long white hair and a long white beard—Polseidon—walked up. "There you are, Rolindeim! What are you doing here?"

"Huh? Oh, there was a girl looking for some huge hulk of a man, right? Not you, though, Polseidon. Apparently, this one ain't a pensioner."

"What?!" Polseidon snapped. "I'm just as good as any whippersnapper! Behold, my glorious physique!" He flexed, revealing his powerful, bulging muscles.

"Well, I never said you didn't have the muscles, right?"

"You're not looking at me! Look!"

"Ugh." Rolindeim sighed. "I hate it when he gets like this." She screwed up her face...and ran away.

"Wait! Come back! Look at me!!!" Polseidon bellowed, chasing after her.

◇The Dark Citadel—One Week Later◇

A great commotion was happening outside the Dark Citadel. The Infernals Yorminyt the Serpent Princess and Hugi-Mugi were gone, and most of the Dark Army had left in their wake. And now, a great force of demons had the Citadel surrounded.

"Pitiful." Zanzibar smirked. "I had hoped to encounter *some* resistance."

There were many strongholds and watchtowers in the Dark Army's territory, but they had been left empty and undefended. Zanzibar's rebel army had been unopposed in their march.

Zanzibar looked up at the firmly shut Citadel doors. "Aha ha ha

ha!" he chortled, drunk on victory. "With Yuigarde out of my way, I can subjugate the Dark Citadel in five minutes! The throne of the Dark One shall be mine...and then, the world!"

"Goodness gracious!" a voice said. "That wouldn't do at all!"

"Hmm?" Zanzibar turned. The voice had come from the other side of the shut doors. "Then there are still those within the Dark Army who would raise arms against us?"

"Oh, nothing so grand as all that. But it wouldn't do for me to simply run away after being given the responsibilities of the Dark One."

Creeeeak... The door opened to reveal two figures—the robed Calsi'im and his minion Tia.

Zanzibar chuckled. "If it isn't Calsi'im! My regards for our last such contest."

"Gracious! But we would have never won the day if it hadn't been for the Dark One Yuigarde." Calsi'im replied. "I couldn't possibly hold you off on my own."

"You have a firm grasp of the situation, then," said Zanzibar. "But I am not the type to leave myself vulnerable. You may be nothing more than an old skeleton, Calsi'im, but if we fight, I will crush you with my full strength. Ah, but forgive my discourtesy. It is *Dark Regent* Calsi'im now, is it not?" He pointed at the armlet Calsi'im wore—the seal of the Dark One. "That is the Dark One's armlet, I believe. If I seize it from you, will you acknowledge me as the new Dark One?"

"Well now!" Calsi'im said, playing along. "This armlet is the seal of the Dark One! If you can claim it, then I suppose that that's what it would make you!"

Zanzibar grinned triumphantly. "Then we understand each other. Would you stop this pointless show of resistance and give me the armlet? If you do so, I will spare the lives of the demons in this Citadel."

"Hmm..." Calsi'im inclined his head. "You'll spare the lives of everyone here in exchange for a single armlet?"

"Think what you will of me, but for a devil, I am not without mercy. I would never break a solemn—"

"Oh yeah?!" Belianna stepped forward from the darkness behind Calsi'im. "Is that a damned joke, you damned old man?"

"You..." Zanzibar growled. "The traitor Belianna, here to lick the Dark Army's boots, I presume."

"Don't make me laugh. A damned traitor, he says! And after playing us damned devils for fools. I know damned well you plan to slaughter every last demon if the Dark Regent gives you the damned armlet."

Zanzibar sighed. "Hmph. If that's how you want to do this, traitor,

then so be it.”



Zanzibar raised his arm towards the heavens and gave a mighty shout. “Raaaaaah!!!”

His army echoed back, rallying with one voice. “Yaaaaaah!!!”

“Calsi’im!” Tia moved in front of the Dark Regent to protect him, spreading her arms wide and staring down Zanzibar.

“What have we here?” Zanzibar said. “A magic doll? Protecting its master of its own volition, I see...” He sounded mildly impressed.

Meiden squinted at Tia from her place beside Zanzibar. “It would take an incredible spellcaster to create a doll like that,” she said. “That might be one of the greater magic dolls created by the phantom mage Dorn, Master...”

“Oh?” said Zanzibar. “Fascinating...”

“How I would love to get my hands on it, take it apart, see how it works...” A twisted, depraved smile spread across Meiden’s face. “With such a developed sense of self, it’s bound to make the most *delightful* screams.”

“Very well!” Zanzibar sneered. “Then take the magic doll alive, and kill the rest!”

“Oh, dear!” Calsi’im exclaimed. “It seems Miss Belianna was correct! They never intended to make peace!”

“Obviously, you damned Dark Regent,” said Belianna.

“Ah, well...” Calsi’im sighed. “I thought I might be able to settle things on my own, if they had been willing to talk. I suppose we will need their help after all.”

Zanzibar cackled uproariously. “Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha haaa!!! ‘Help’?! Don’t make me laugh! Nobody is coming to—”

“Awawoooooooooooooooooooo!!!”

A deafening howl rang out, drowning out the rebels’ war cries. Terror seized their hearts. The weaker among them collapsed on the spot.

“Th-That howl...!”

“I can’t even stand! The pressure!”

“What...?”

The rebels were in disarray.

Zanzibar clicked his tongue in anger. “Wh-What is this?! Collapsing from a single howl?! What kind of—”

“M-Master!” Meiden shouted. She was pointing towards the roof of the Dark Citadel. “Look!”

Zanzibar could see the silhouette of an enormous wolf. He wrinkled his nose in doubt. “Impossible...” he said. “I’ve never heard of a wolf so big...” Then he noticed a number of other figures accompanying the wolf.

“I suppose diplomacy didn’t work, then...” said the one in front—a

man in a wolf mask.

“Hardly a surprise, my lord husband,” the wolf responded. “The Dark Army is all but destroyed. The rebels have no reason to listen to any demands they would make.”

“I suppose so...” the man said. Then he turned to address the others. “All right. I’m counting on you. Remember, be sure not to harm anyone who flees or surrenders.”

The others were also wearing wolf masks, similar in design to their leader’s. They nodded in unison.

“As you command, Exalted One. Your humble servants shall see to it.”

“Heh. It’s about time I had a chance to show you all what the Grand Magus of Midnight can do!”

“Hrm. Just don’t blame me if I accidentally injure someone running away.”

“Well now if mew *do*, we *know* it’s on purrpose!”

“I suppose this former Infernal can come out of retirement for a single battle.”

“Yeah! I’m gonna make dada proud of me!”

The mysterious fighters took to the sky, seemingly using magic to fly through the air. The great wolf, meanwhile, leapt down from the roof, landing right in front of Zanzibar. She ruffled her gorgeous white fur and turned her ferocious gaze over the rebel army.

“N-No...” one of the rebels stuttered. “A white lupine demon... Then...the rumors were true?”

“Th-That’s a lupine?!” said another.

“Blasted hells...”

“Th-Then...the man giving the wolf orders...the one in the blue wolf mask... Is that...the Wolf of Justice...?”

Zanzibar’s eyes went wide. “Th-The Wolf of Justice?! Preposterous! That man works for the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode! He is an enemy of all demons! Why would he side with the Dark Army...?”

“Now, now, sir,” Calsi’im corrected him. “I believe you are somewhat mistaken!”

“Wh-What? Mistaken?”

“Indeed! Look!” Calsi’im reached into his robes and retrieved a single letter, which he held out for Zanzibar to see.

It was the letter Flio had sent Sleip long ago. It read: “We wish for peace.”

“Peace...” Zanzibar said. “But even so, how could you have secured his cooperation...?”

“Oh, that was simple enough! I just asked him if he could help me negotiate a peace treaty with the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode!”

“You *what*?!” Zanzibar cried out in shock, but Calsi’im didn’t react. He just stood there, holding the letter for Zanzibar, the very picture of patience. “Impossible! Humans and demons have been at war for decades—no, centuries! How can you speak of peace like it’s nothing?!”

“Indeed,” Calsi’im said. “I understand that well, as does the Wolf of Justice. This treaty is between the Dark Army and the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode—*not* between humans and demons.”

“The Magical Kingdom...and the Dark Army?” Zanzibar asked.

“Precisely! All of our remaining soldiers have agreed, and I suppose that anyone else who wants to join will have to go along with it.”

“Idiocy!” Zanzibar shouted, drawing his sword. “Then I shall kill the lot of you and void this treaty of yours!” He struck...only for his sword to be blocked. *Clang!* Belianna jumped into the fray, deflecting Zanzibar’s blade with her scythe.

“Not a damned chance, Zanzibar!” she said. “I won’t let you interfere with the Dark Regent’s plan!” Zanzibar raised his blade to attack again, but Belianna brandished her scythe. “Try as many damned times as you like!”

Just then, a great horde of skeletons shambled up from behind her, spears in hand. They advanced towards Zanzibar. “We’re here to help, missy!”

“Us old-timers haven’t thrown away our spears just yet!”

“Ahh, this brings me back to the good old days! Fighting alongside Calsi’im and Lady Derabbitz...”

These were Calsi’im’s friends and former subordinates—the skeleton veterans who had seen the Dark Army through all kinds of hardships.

“Hah!” Belianna laughed. “You damned sacks of bones protect the Dark Regent. Zanzibar is mine, damn it!” She swung her scythe deftly, showing off her skill with the weapon, and brought it to a guard.

“Cheeky brat...” Zanzibar said, adjusting his stance.

But before they could come to blows, Meiden, who had been standing by, interrupted them. “Master!” she shrieked. “Terrible news!”

“Wh-What is it, Meiden?!” Zanzibar shouted back. “Now isn’t a good time!”

“Y-Yes, but...but...our army...! They’re being torn apart!”

“What?!”

A fierce battle had been raging while Zanzibar stood off against Belianna. Wyne, in her wyvern form, laughed loudly as she shot blasts of dragon fire from her mouth, reducing her opponents to ash on the

spot. “Aha ha ha ha! Burn! *Burn!*”

“You burn them, Wyne, and I will trample them flat!” Sleip charged forward. His lichsteed form was massive; demon after demon got crushed underfoot.

“Mreow!” Uliminas yelled. She was wearing a purple wolf mask and had her claws at the ready. “I’m not gonna let the big guys get all the glory!” She dove into the enemy ranks, tearing apart anyone who dared raise a weapon against her.

Meanwhile, Flio—the Wolf of Justice himself—was flying high above the battlefield. He raised his arms to conjure a magic circle, casting the spell Gravitation, his old favorite. It pinned every rebel still standing in his vicinity to the ground.

“Well, *that* makes me feel a little pointless...” Damalynas grumbled.

“Now, now, Damalynas. You mustn’t say such things,” said Hiya. “Ah, pardon me. I am meant to call you the Wolf of Midnight.”

“Oh, that’s right! And I’m supposed to call you the Wolf of Light and Darkness.”

“Precisely,” said Hiya. “Our job is important in its own way. We are meant to assist any who wish to quit the rebels and rejoin the Dark Army.”

“And protect them from that guy, right?” Damalynas glanced over at where Ghozal, wearing a black wolf mask, was casting thunderbolts all around him, pursuing the rebels as they fled.

“Come on!” Ghozal shouted. “Stop running away! I’m not allowed to attack you unless you fight me!”

“We surrender!” the demons shouted. “Please! Spare our lives!”

But Ghozal simply laughed. “What was that?! I can’t hear you over my lightning bolts!” Clearly, this was at least somewhat premeditated.

“Jeez...” said Damalynas. “That looks bad...”

“It does...” agreed Hiya. “First, we must rescue those demons from Ghozal—forgive me. I mean, from the Black Wolf.”

“Right!” Damalynas nodded and flew off.

“H-How can this be...?” Zanzibar couldn’t believe his eyes. “I don’t care how strong this Wolf of Justice is... He has five...maybe six companions?! How can ten thousand soldiers be routed by six fighters?!”

But Belianna wasn’t wasting time. She bore down on Zanzibar, swinging her scythe in wide circles. “You’ll die not understanding!” she taunted. “This is what happens when you fight the damned Wolf of Justice! Take this!” She aimed a rising slash at the rebel leader.

“Ngh?!” Zanzibar cried as Belianna’s scythe caught his sword and

tore it from his hand, sending it flying skyward. It landed tip first, plunging into the ground behind him.

“Damned checkmate,” Belianna declared. She held out her scythe, pointing dramatically with her weapon.

“This isn’t over...” Zanzibar growled.

“It isn’t?!”

“I still have a hidden ace! Meiden!”

“Yes, Master!” Meiden began to chant, and a huge magic circle appeared, enveloping her body. “The time has come... Balunhamut, beast of legends! I summon you!” Another magic circle appeared in the sky above the forest to the north. Slowly, it began to rotate. And then, a colossal magic beast appeared—fully thirty feet from its head to its claws. It landed, and—

Thud!

With a terrible roar, the freshly summoned legendary beast Balunhamut was sucked into the ground beneath its feet.

“What?!” Meiden, the summoner, exclaimed. For a second, she lost her concentration. The magic circle around her began to warp and close in on her. “N-No! Not that! Noooooo!!!” she screamed as her body was engulfed. The circle vanished without a trace, taking Meiden with it.

“What...?” Flio, who had come running when he’d noticed something was off, watched as Meiden vanished into nothing.

“That woman failed to maintain her concentration while performing a great summoning, Exalted One,” Hiya explained. “She has fallen into the rift between worlds. Sadly, she is beyond the reach of even I, the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness.”

“I see...” Flio muttered to himself, frowning.

Flio came over to stand next to Calsi’im. Before long, Wyne, Rys, Uliminas, and the others had joined them. The attacking army was utterly vanquished.

Zanzibar looked around, disbelieving, and fell to his knees. “I’m finished...” He looked over at Belianna and undid his collar, exposing his bare neck. “Do it.”

“Hah!” Belianna laughed. She swung the scythe in a circle and brought it to rest on her shoulder. “We’re apparently trying not to take lives unless we damned well have to. It’s some kind of damned principle.”

The Wolf of Justice clapped a hand on her shoulder. “Thank you,” he said. “You made the right decision.”

“Heh...” Belianna chuckled. “Thanks.” She smiled.



Zanzibar’s rebellion had come to an end. Balunhamut, the beast

Meiden had summoned, was found dead in a ludicrously oversized pit trap of unknown provenience. The Dark Army organized a group to dispose of the corpse, but by the time they got there, they found that it had already vanished.

As for Zanzibar himself, the Dark Regent Calsi'im had him locked up in a dungeon underneath the Dark Citadel to await the Dark One Yuigarde's judgment, were he ever to return.

Most of the rebels whom Hiya and Damalynas captured ended up changing sides and joining the Dark Army, refreshing its devastated numbers overnight. The Dark Army was far from the force it used to be, but it had at least regained a bit of its former strength.

◇In a Forest◇

"My lord, come look! It's huge!" Valentine happily exclaimed.

Hero Gold-Hair nodded and grinned triumphantly. "So it is!" he said. "I suppose you can catch some big ones this close to the Dark Citadel! This spot was a good find, Riliangiu!"

Riliangiu smiled but shook her head. "I did nothing of note," she said. "I simply happened to discover traces of summoning magic in this area. It was your decision to dig a pitfall big enough to trap the summoned beast when it appeared."

"Ha ha ha! Then I suppose both of us get to take credit!" Riliangiu bowed her head, smiling happily at Gold-Hair's praise. "And Dawkson!" he added. "Good job getting that thing out of the hole! That was quite the feat of strength!"

"Aww..." Dawkson smiled. "I didn't do nothin', Blondie." *Huh... he thought. It feels kinda good getting praised! I guess they were right about the carrots and sticks. I never gave my underlings enough credit when I was Dark One... I just threatened them until they did what I wanted!* Dawkson nodded along, lost in his thoughts.

"What about me, my lord?" Valentine asked. "I was the one who wrapped it up with dark spider webs so we could fit it in the Bottomless Bag! Did I do good?"

"You did very good, Valentine. Good girl!" Hero Gold Hair patted Valentine on the head as the former Evil General beamed like a child.

Tsuya gleefully watched on. "I wonder how much the Advееenturers' Association will pay for such an amaaaazing magic beast!" she said. "I can't waaait!"

"Yes!" said Hero Gold-Hair. "This should take care of the money problems you've been so worried about, Tsuya!"

"Yeeeah!" Tsuya's smile got even brighter. "And then my stoomach will stop hurting so much!"

"All right!" Hero Gold-Hair nodded. "Now that that's settled, let's hurry to the Adventurers' Association! And tonight, a feast!"

“Yeah!” the others cheered, raising their fists skyward. They continued on the road towards the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode.

◇Phufun, Meanwhile...◇

“Now where am I...?” Phufun took a look around, her body shivering with cold. The Magical Kingdom of Klyrode was a relatively temperate land, but Phufun had somehow found her way to a vast snowfield. The merciless winter wind cut into her body. Phufun didn’t wear much in the way of clothing, and it felt like the cold was seeping into her very core as she took step after step through the snow.

“I-I-I was certain I sensed a powerful demon somewhere around here...” she chattered. “B-B-But...it’s looking like it might have been someone from the Realm of Evil... Oh, I can’t think properly in this cold...”

Phufun pressed her frozen fingertip to the ridge of her glasses to adjust them and tried to spread her wings only to find that she couldn’t. They had been frozen stiff. There was no way she could fly in this state.

“I-I-I need to f-f-find somewhere to warm up...” Phufun pressed her glasses up again, but the lenses were covered in ice. She could hardly make out anything at all. “I-I-I’ll freeze to death at this rate...” she said. “W-Well, I am a succubus. I-I *should* only go dormant. B-B-But that isn’t much better...”

Phufun trudged on and on through the snow, muttering to herself. “Master Yuigarde...” she said. “Where are you? Please... We need you... Zanzibar... The rebels are coming...”

She walked past a large tree that had a sign nailed to it, reading “Beginner Slope.” But with her glasses in the state they were, Phufun didn’t notice.

Epilogue

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

One day, a guest arrived at Flio's house—Calsi'im, the Dark Regent. He was sitting in the living room, his minion Tia standing at his side.

"I've grown so feeble that I don't even set off the Magical Kingdom's demon sensors!" Calsi'im lamented. "Ahh, the toll of time is a terrible thing..." He laughed, his jawbone rattling loudly in his skull.

Flio gave Calsi'im an easygoing smile. "I wouldn't know about that," he said. "It's mostly only walled cities that have demon sensors. They use them to check people entering town. But our house is outside of Houghtow City's walls."

"I see!" Calsi'im said. "And that's how you got the former Dark One Lord Gholl, his confederate Lady Uliminas, the former Infernal Lord Sleip, and the legendary Lady Fenrys all living peaceful lives in this one house!"

"Yes," Flio said. "They're all disguised as humans or demihumans, but if they spend too long in the range of the demon sensors, they'll be found out sooner or later." *Well... he thought. The truth is that the city's demon sensors were made by our store. I simply set them not to detect any of the demons living with us. But there's probably no need to bring that up.* He smiled casually, giving no indication that he was hiding something.

"Now then," Calsi'im said, bowing deeply as Tia bowed behind him. "First, I must thank you properly for your help the other day! I owe you a great deal for agreeing to such a brazen request. The rebel army was about to wipe us off the map, but instead, thanks to you, many of the rebels have come back to the Dark Army! Things are still quite uncertain, but we've taken a big step towards recovery. Thank you for your help, Lord Flio, and all of your comrades."

"C-Calsi'im!" Flio blurted out, alarmed. "It wasn't me who saved the Dark Army; it was my friend, the Wolf of Justice, and his companions! All I did was pass your request on to him..."

"Oooh!" Calsi'im exclaimed cheerfully. "Of course, of course! My apologies! I suppose I'm growing senile in my old age!" It couldn't be more obvious that Calsi'im knew perfectly well who the Wolf of Justice was, but it seemed he was going to say no more on the subject.

“So tell me, Mister Calsi'im,” Flio asked. “Have you sent envoys to the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode?”

“Well, I would really like to speak with them face-to-face, but the Dark Army and the Magical Kingdom are still enemies—officially, at least! I shouldn't go there myself just yet. But I'm afraid that with things as they are with the Dark Army, I haven't been able to find anyone suitable to deliver the message for me...” Calsi'im retrieved a hefty letter from his robes.

“Is that...?”

“The peace treaty between the Dark Army and the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode! But I'm afraid I can only enforce it as long as this old skeleton is sitting in the Dark One's throne. Now, mind you, when the Dark One Yuigarde returns, I will beg him to keep the treaty! I will offer up my life if I must!”

“Hrm...” Ghozal said. “Knowing Yuigarde, it'll be a struggle to get him to agree to that.”

Sleip nodded. “Yes... It's hard to imagine that man being magnanimous about anything!”

“Now, now, you two.” Flio smirked wryly. “You've been getting along swimmingly with the humans, haven't you? I'm sure that one day, the current Dark One Yuigarde will come around too.”

Ghozal and Sleip both tilted their heads dubiously. “I dunno about that one, Mister Flio...” said Ghozal.

“I'm afraid I must agree,” said Sleip. “It seems impossible...”

Uliminas and Rys nodded in agreement.

“Furget it, Flio,” Uliminas said. “That enormews muscle-headed meowron would *never* agree to peace with humanity.”

“As much as I hate to contradict my lord husband, they are correct,” said Rys. “Yuigarde really *is* that much of an idiot.”

Flio's smirk stayed plastered on his face as demon after demon refuted him. *Mister Yuigarde must be a real piece of work...* he thought. “W-Well, putting that aside,” he said, “perhaps I can help you, Mister Calsi'im. Shall I ask my friend, the Wolf of Justice, to deliver this treaty for you?”

Calsi'im sprung to his feet. “Goodness! That would be perfect! After all, the Wolf of Justice is a great man who has devoted himself to protecting the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode! I can't think of anyone better to deliver this message! And as for the Dark Army, we owe him for his help against Zanzibar's rebels! There shouldn't be any problems, I expect!”

Calsi'im handed the treaty to Flio. “All right,” Flio said, bowing politely. “I'll go ahead and ask the Wolf of Justice.” *Which is me, of course...*



A few days later, the Wolf of Justice visited Klyrode Castle to deliver the Dark Regent Calsi'im's peace treaty directly into the hands of the Maiden Queen. The Queen called a meeting the same day, where she proposed accepting the terms.

Some of her ministers had objections. "This treaty will only last so long as Calsi'im is acting as Dark Regent, no? Then what good does it do us?"

But the Queen rejected that way of thinking. "Agreeing to this peace treaty is an important first step," she said. "We will show the world that the people of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode *and* the Dark Army can live happily together. Their smiles will be our proof. When the Dark One Yuigarde returns, I am certain that he will wish to continue in peace." After that, nobody objected to the proposed treaty.

A week passed, and before anyone knew it, the Maiden Queen of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode and the Dark Regent of the Dark Army met at Siluanca Fortress, midway between the Dark Citadel and Klyrode Castle as the crow flies. The Wolf of Justice and the white lupine said to be his familiar acted as witnesses.

Finally, the letter that Flio—or rather, the Wolf of Justice—had sent the Dark Army wishing for peace had borne fruit. The contract was signed, and the Maiden Queen and Dark Regent shook hands. The Wolf of Justice applauded for all he was worth.

◇Houghtow City—The Fli-o'-Rys General Store◇

Flio stood behind the store, checking the incoming goods, when Rys walked up to him. "Perhaps you should take a break, my lord husband." She was carrying a pot of tea and a basket full of snacks.

Flio gave her one of his easygoing smiles. "Maybe I should," he said. "I suppose it is about that time." The two went inside the store and headed for the staff break room.

"Excuse me, miss!" he heard a child's voice say. "Do you have any Wolf of Justice masks?" He turned to look and saw a grinning Uliminas surrounded by a great crowd of children.

"We sure do!" she said. "It's a brand-mew purroduct!" She began handing them out to the children—simple replicas of the mask Flio wore as the Wolf of Justice, sized for children.

"Huh?" Flio asked. "Is that...?"

"The Wolf of Justice is very popular," Rys said. "Both the Magical Kingdom and the Dark Army know him as the man who brought peace to this world."

"So...you made those masks?"

"Yes," Rys smiled warmly. "Uliminas insisted. She said something

like, ‘Mew better believe kids will go wild fur them! They’ll be sold meowt in a meowment!’” she said, doing an impression of the hellcat. “I suppose she was right.”

Flio and Rys watched the kids hurry to put their new masks on. It looked like they were having tremendous fun. Rys pressed close to her husband, wrapping her arms around his. “You’re amazing, my lord husband,” she said. “You really did put a stop to the war.”

Flio held Rys close. “I didn’t do it alone,” he said. “I couldn’t have done it without your help—you and the rest of the people here.”

Flio glanced back over at another crowd of children who had come to buy Wolf of Justice masks. It looked like Ghozal had gotten himself involved at some point. He was holding in his hand a mask designed after the one he would wear when he went on missions with the Wolf of Justice.

“Hey, kids,” Ghozal said. “Those Wolf of Justice masks are pretty cool, but what do you think of this Black Wolf mask?” It was bigger than the Wolf of Justice masks, and it had a sinister-looking grin with great big fangs. Overall, it was quite monstrous.

“I dunno...” one of the kids said. “It’s kinda spooky...”

“Yeah, the Wolf of Justice mask is cooler!” said another.

“I want a Wolf of Justice mask!” a third kid chimed in.

The kids turned away from Ghozal and crowded around Uliminas, clamoring for Wolf of Justice masks.

“What?!” Ghozal exclaimed. “*Nobody* wanted it...?” He slumped his shoulders, dejected.

Uliminas glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and inwardly smirked. *I told him that mask was too creepy*, she thought.

As Flio and Rys watched the scene unfold, a boy and a girl in Wolf of Justice masks came running up to them.

“Dad!” the boy said. “Isn’t my mask cool?”

“I think they’re cool,” said the girl.

These children, of course, were Garyl and Elinàsze.

“Oh?” Flio asked. “Are you two fans of the Wolf of Justice?” The twins beamed and nodded.

“Of course I am!” said Garyl.

“Yes, of course!” Elinàsze agreed.

“I mean, the Wolf of Justice ended the war between humans and demons, right?” Garyl went on. “He’s incredible!”

“He’s a hero who did something everybody thought was impossible,” said Elinàsze. “I think he’s amazing.”

“I see!” Flio smiled happily. “So you think so too.”

The Wolf of Justice masks were a top seller almost immediately. After all, everyone admired the Wolf of Justice. To the children, he

was a hero. To adults, he was a symbol of peace.

Side Story: Everyone's Morrow Part 5

◇Houghtow City—Houghtow College of Magic◇

In the Houghtow College of Magic's administrative office was an interview room, where Taclyde, the school's one and only administrator, was speaking with two women.

"Well," he said, "first of all, thank you for answering our call for school faculty. Now, I've taken a quick look over your resumes, and I would like to ask...can you tell me anything more about some of these items? Especially where it says 'Commanded large scale military force' and 'Provided special training for subordinates'..."

The woman who was sitting to Taclyde's right opened her mouth to respond, brushing aside a strand of long blue hair as she spoke. "Yesss, of coursse. I've led armiesss of up to ssseveral thousssand sssoldiers into battle. I'm undefeated asss well. My motto isss *ever onwardsss*. I persssonally prefer to fight practically, with a sssword."

The short-haired woman to Taclyde's left wore a maid uniform and a pair of round glasses, which she pushed up onto the bridge of her nose before speaking. "I served as my liege's assistant for many years," she said. "In such capacity, I was more or less in charge of training our army. My specialty is honing physical abilities." She adjusted her glasses again.

"Hmm..." Taclyde took another look at the pair's resumes and gave the matter some thought. *It feels like there's a story here... That blue-haired woman... Her name is Miss Nyt, and she's led armies in the thousands?! Perhaps she was one of the people in charge of the kingdom's knights! She may have failed in some way unrelated to battle and had to quit and look for other work... And that maid, Miss Zarmas... Could she have quit the army to follow the other woman?!*

Taclyde, who had come to his own conclusions about what was happening, shed a single tear. *Ahhh, the cruelties of military life! To fire someone with such a history of distinguished service, all because of some ridiculous idea of setting an example! I'm certain they'll do excellent work if we hire them... Sniffle...* He began to sob.

Zarmas and Nyt glanced at his face and exchanged a look with each other.

"Zarmasss..." Nyt whispered. "Why isss thisss human man crying?"

"No doubt he is overjoyed to find candidates as qualified as the

two of us, Lady Yorminyt,” Zarmas answered, adjusting her glasses.

“I sssee...” Nyt muttered. “But be careful, Zarmasss. When I am human, my name isss Nyt.”

“O-Oh... Of course, Lady Yor—I mean, Lady Nyt.” Zarmas adjusted her glasses twice more.

Indeed, as you may have guessed, this was Yorminyt, formerly of the Infernal Four, and her assistant, the vampire Helzarmas. Having lost all faith in the Dark One Yuigarde, the two cast away their demon identities to live as humans and came to the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode seeking work. They happened to spot a flier saying the Houghtow College of Magic was looking for staff, and arranged an interview right away.

“Yes,” Taclyde said, wiping the tears from his eyes and sitting back up straight. “Well, I think I understand your circumstances well enough. You’ll need experience before you’re ready to teach the lower grades, but we can certainly hire you as outside lecturers for our adult classes! And everyone at the school can help you with tests and the like. A pleasure to work with you.”

“Hm?” Nyt wondered. “Have we already been hired?”

“I suppose this is a sign that he has correctly judged our talents,” said Zarmas.

“I sssee...” Nyt nodded. “In that cassse, I accept. A pleasssure to work with you.” She held out her hand.

“Pleasure to work with you,” Zarmas echoed, holding out her hand as well.

Taclyde shook both of their hands, a big smile on his face.

“I have a favor to asssk, actually...” Nyt said. “Due to our...sssituation, we are currently sssearching for a place to live. Would you happen to know of anything of the sssort?”

“Searching for a place to live, are you?” Taclyde answered. “Well then, that’s perfect!” He led them out of the administrative office and down a hallway.

“Mister Taclyde, where are we going?” Zarmas asked.

“You see,” Taclyde began, “since we’re opening lower-grade classes this spring, we contracted a company to refurbish the old school store...and we’ve added a second and third floor to serve as a dormitory for children whose families live far away! We’ve been looking for an adult to live here and serve as the dorm’s mother, if you will. Would you two be interested in the job? It’s rent-free, of course, and food will be provided as well.”

“Hmmm...” pondered Nyt. “That ssseems to be a promissing offer...”

“Might I ask,” Zarmas inquired, “what exactly would be a dorm mother’s specific responsibilities?”

“Mostly just looking after the students living there!” Taclyde answered. “You’d need to make sure nobody gets locked outside at closing time...and that nobody wanders outside after the gates close either! And it will be your job to take care of any kind of trouble...like a magic beast or a kidnapper. You two both have combat experience, I believe. I assume you could handle that?”

“I could,” Nyt answered. “I do not believe we will have any difficultiesss with thessse tasssks. Do you, Zarmasss?”

“No, Lady Yor— Er... *Ahem!* Lady Nyt. If anything needs to be done, I shall execute it with precision.”

“Excellent, excellent!”

As they talked, the three arrived at a newer-looking three-story building a short distance away from the school building itself. “This is the school shop and dormitory,” said Taclyde. “The dorm mother’s room is on the second floor.”

The three walked up the stairs to find...

“Meow? Yorminyt?”

“Zarmasss! I told you not to call me—”

“No! It wasn’t me this time!”

“What?!” Nyt was stunned. “Then who...?” The two frantically scanned the area, their eyes coming to rest quickly on the dark-skinned girl with cat ears handling some kind of delivery. She was staring at the two with wide-open eyes.

“U-Uliminasss?!” exclaimed Nyt. “Th-The confederate of Dark One Gholl?!”

“Wh-What brings you here, m-my most distinguished lady?” stammered Zarmas.

With all the grace of the hellcat she was, Uliminas moved instantaneously. Suddenly, she was behind them, clamping their mouths shut. “Meowt are mew blabbing about?!” she snapped. And then... “Aha...ha ha ha ha...” she laughed as cutely as she could as she turned to face Taclyde.

Uliminas had come here as part of her job for the Fli-o’-Rys General Store to deliver fresh inventory to the Houghtow College of Magic school shop. It had been a complete coincidence that she was here at the same time as Yorminyt and Helzarmas.

Uliminas kept laughing unnaturally as she pressed her head up between the pair’s ears to whisper to both at once. “I’m purrtending to be a demihuman!” she told them. “Don’t let them hear mew using my meowld title!”

“How ssstrange...” said Nyt. “I too am disguissed ass a human.”

“I am disguised as a human as well,” added Zarmas.

“Well that simplifies meowtters,” Uliminas said. “In that case, we can just agree not to discuss meowr pasts. Okay?”

"I have no objectionsss."

"If Lady Nyt has no objections, then I, Zarmas, must surely not."

"Great. Purrfect." Uliminas released Nyt and Zarmas from her grasp and smiled cheerfully. "I can't believe it! My old neighbors! From my hometown! To think I would see mew *here* of all places!"

"Yesss," Nyt agreed, following Uliminas's lead and smiling brightly. "It isss a moving coincidence."

"I too am deeply moved," Zarmas said, smiling as well.

"Well now!" Taclyde said. "So you three have met each other before! Miss Nyt, Miss Zarmas, this is Miss Uliminas from the Fli-o'-Rys General Store. She's helping manage our inventory! Now, Miss Uliminas, these two are going to be working here at the college—and as dorm mothers as well!"

The three shook hands, giving each other strained, thin-lipped smiles. And so, Nyt and Zarmas became the newest faculty of the Houghtow College of Magic. Only Uliminas knew that they were once part of the Dark Army.

◇Deep in a Forest◇

"How rude, yes! Yes! Terribly rude, these humans!" Hugi-Mugi, in their human form, regarded the unconscious human woman before them with folded arms and a head cocked in confusion. "Bursting in where someone lives and suddenly screaming and fainting, yes! Yes, fainting and screaming!"

Hugi-Mugi had once been a member of the Infernal Four. In their true form, they were a doppeladler, a monstrous two-headed bird with a body covered in golden scales. In their human form, they looked like any ordinary youth—aside from when they spoke, which they somehow did with two voices at once.

"We quit the Dark Army and came to this forest to live a peaceful life, yes! Yes! But so many adventurers have been coming here recently, yes... We wonder what could be the cause of it." Hugi-Mugi chattered to themselves as they walked through the forest, carrying the unconscious woman on their shoulder. "At least we are still rather strong in our human form, yes! Yes, but it is so restrictive... So restrictive, yes. We wish to return to our doppeladler form soon, yes!"

They walked on for half a day, until they left the forest and came to a town. An acquaintance of Hugi-Mugi's—a woman named Cartha—was there to greet them. "Oh? Hugi, did you find an adventurer passed out in the forest again?"

"Yes indeed! Indeed, yes! It wouldn't do to leave her there, no, not at all..."

"Aha ha!" Cartha laughed. "You can drop her off at my place. I'll look after her until she comes to."

“Thank you, yes! Yes, thank you!” Hugi-Mugi brought the adventurer inside Cartha’s small house a short distance outside of town, where she lived by herself and tilled her own fields.

Hugi-Mugi, who had brought adventurers here before for Cartha to look after, was familiar by now with the layout of her house. They made their way into Cartha’s bedroom and laid the adventurer out on the bed.

“Why have so many adventurers come to the forest?” Hugi-Mugi wondered. “There were far fewer not long ago, yes. Yes, far fewer...”

“Don’t you know?” Cartha asked. “I thought you must, since you live in the forest... It seems that recently, a great magic beast came around here.”

“A magic beast?”

“Yes! The people who saw it said it was a great beast with two heads and a golden body. A lot of adventurers have come here hoping to get their hands on its scales! All of the inns and taverns have been doing tremendous business with this beast hunt mania...and I suppose it keeps giving me a reason to see my beloved Hugi!”

“Hmm...” Hugi-Mugi folded their arms and inclined their head in thought. “I’ve never seen such a magic beast, no! No, never seen it!”

It didn’t take much thought at all to realize that the magic beast could only be Hugi-Mugi themselves, but it seemed like the doppeladler had yet to come to this realization.

Cartha, meanwhile, was growing increasingly red. *Hey, Hugi... she thought, fidgeting impatiently. I mustered my courage and called you my beloved Hugi and you didn’t even react?!*

“Cartha, we are hungry, yes!” said Hugi-Mugi. “Yes, very hungry. Would you make food for us?”

“H-Huh? Oh...okay. I’ll get started right away.” Cartha sighed as she headed towards the kitchen. *Hugi just doesn’t care about me at all...*

Hugi-Mugi, meanwhile, hummed happily as they sat in their chair. “Cartha’s cooking is delicious, yes! Yes, we love it!”

Love...? Cartha’s face lit up. “Just you wait, Hugi!” she cried. “I’ll make you the best meal you’ve ever tasted!”

“Thank you! We love you, yes!”

Cartha’s face turned bright red, and she grinned from ear to ear. *Love? My Hugi said they love me!* She got to work on the food, portioning out a generous serving of meat for Hugi-Mugi.

We were thinking of moving now that the adventurers are here, yes... Hugi-Mugi mused. *But we cannot leave Cartha, no! No, we want to stay here!*

◇Somewhere in the Kinosaki Hot Springs Village◇

“At long last, we have arrived.”

“Yes. At very long last, Your Divinity...”

Damalynas and Hiya stood in front of a particular building. It was an old building, decorated here and there with colorful paint. It stood out like a sore thumb from the buildings around it.

Above its entrance was a sign that read: “Kinosaki Museum of Erotic Art.”

Hiya and Damalynas looked at the building’s door. “The museum should not be closed today, correct?” Hiya asked.

“Correct, Your Divinity.” Damalynas said. “This time we made sure to look up their scheduled holidays...”

“Then, the paintings...the literature...and the artifacts...all relating to sex and the sexual culture of humans, demihumans, *and* demons...are inside that building...?” Hiya said between deep breaths. “Gulp...”

“So much stuff we could use for inspiration...” Damalynas marveled. “Gulp...”

“Then, with no further delay!”

“Yes!”

The two reached for the doors simultaneously, only...

The doors rattled but would not open.

“Hm?”

“It won’t...open...”

They tried again, to no avail.

“I knew it...”

“They’re closed...”

The two shared a worried look and tried again. And again. But the door simply wouldn’t budge. It seemed to be locked.

“How...could this be?” Hiya despaired.

“Why are they closed?” Damalynas asked. “We checked the schedule and everything...”

Just then, a man came up from behind and spoke to them. “Hello, you two. Do you need something from this building?”

“Yes,” responded Hiya. “We have come to the Museum of Erotic Art to study the exhibits therein. We expect it to be of great use in our training.”

“That’s right!” Damalynas chimed in. “We’re here because of our training!”

“I see...” the man said. “Well, I’m very sorry, but the museum closed for good just yesterday.”

“Wh-What did you say?!” both Hiya and Damalynas exclaimed at once. They stood there staring blankly, stunned.

“It’s a pity...but I’m afraid it just hasn’t been very popular lately! They haven’t had any customers in quite a while. The old man who runs the place finally closed it up. Everything just vanished overnight.

It's hard to believe! It was still in business until this very morning!"
The man grimaced.

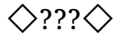
Hiya and Damalynas stood glued to the spot, their bodies shaking.

"*Yesterday...*" muttered Hiya.

"It's too cruel..." Damalynas added.

They seemed terribly disappointed. It was evening before they finally moved away from the building.





“Meiden... Meiden!”

“Wh-What?! Master Zanzibar?!” Meiden sprung out of bed to find not Zanzibar but a woman. She looked unhappy about something.

“Zanzibar?” the woman asked. “Who’s that?”

“Um... Huh?” Still dazed and confused, Meiden glanced around the room. It looked like she was in someone’s bedroom; in it was a large double bed she had just jumped out of. “O-Oh! I...”

“Are you all right, Meiden?” the woman asked. “Do you recognize me? It’s me, Verillian. You know, Verillian!”

“O-Oh, yes...” Meiden finally remembered who this person was. “Verillian, my beloved sister!” She leapt into Verillian’s arms, a look of absolute adoration on her face.

Verillian gave Meiden a worried look. “Are you really all right? I know you don’t remember anything from before you fell out of the dimensional rift... Maybe Zanzibar is someone you knew back then. Do you want to go ask Master Sua about him? Master Sua is a wizard of legends. Surely there’s something we can...”

“No...” Meiden hugged Verillian even tighter. “I would rather not. I decided I was going to live for the future, and not cling to the past...”

“I trust you, Meiden,” Verillian said. “Do what you think is best.” She handed Meiden a set of clothes. “Anyway, it’s time to get ready for work. Today, we’re going to inspect the nearby city of Uri Nakhombe. Time permitting, we may visit the merchant city of Hope as well.”

Meiden, who slept naked, put on the outfit Verillian gave her as they spoke. “Leave that to me, sister. With my Teleportation spell, we should easily be able to visit both.”

“Of course!” Verillian smiled. “Thank you as always, Meiden.”

Meiden finished getting dressed and wrapped her arms around one of Verillian’s, smiling happily. “I’m ready! Let’s get to work, sister!”

“Yes, it’s another busy day, Meiden.”

Meiden, who had fallen into the rift between dimensions, had found a job and a happy life in another world. But that is a story for another time.



◇ A Building in Dark Army Territory ◇

“There it is!” yipped Kintsuno the Gold. “Zanzibar’s hidden treasure!” She danced for joy in the entrance to the hidden room they

had found in an old empty manor.

"I knew it would be here!" The Shadow King nodded to himself, satisfied, as he followed her into the room.

Gintsuno the Silver was standing next to him, looking over her map. This manor was at one of several spots indicated by a small red X. "I'm impressed, Shadow King," she said. "You found out all this while Zanzibar was staying with us for protection..." She grinned.

"Well, I didn't hide him out of the goodness of my heart!" the Shadow King said. "It was all to make money! I noticed he'd sometimes have his hidden treasure brought to him while he was lurking in our hideout... It was a simple matter of sending some of my underlings to tail them!"

"I see..." said Kintsuno. "And now Zanzibar is imprisoned in the Dark Citadel."

"Yes! And now *I'm* here to expropriate those resources! Like a king would do!"

"I love it!" Gintsuno yipped excitedly. "It's perfect!" She and her sister danced around happily.

"What are we waiting for?!" Kintsuno yipped.

"Let's go!" agreed Gintsuno. The two began stuffing the Bottomless Bags they had brought full of priceless treasures as the Shadow King watched on, nodding triumphantly.

"Shadow King!" cried Kintsuno. "What are you doing, standing around like that?"

"What?" the Shadow King sputtered. "I'm... I'm overseeing the operation!"

"Well, quit it and come help!" said Gintsuno.

"W-Well..." he said. "I don't know. I've been putting on a great deal of weight recently. With my stomach..."

"All the more reason!" Kintsuno shot back. "Come get some exercise! It'll be good for you."

"Gh..." protested the Shadow King. "I... I can't..."

"You didn't even try!" Gintsuno said. "Come on! You can do it!"

The Shadow King finally succumbed to pressure and did his best to help, panting and wheezing the whole time. *Damnation!* he thought. *I need a slave to carry my luggage! I'll die at this rate...*

◇Houghtow City—Houghtow College of Magic Dormitories◇

One day, Belianna came to Houghtow City to visit Irystiel, her younger sister. "Dark Regent Calsi'im gave me some damned time off, so this time I can stay overnight."

"I see!" Irystiel replied using her black cat plush. As always, she opened and closed its mouth to make it speak. "That is wonderful news, darling Belianna!" Irystiel had trouble expressing herself with

words, but on her face was a great big happy smile.

Belianna smiled back, glad to see her sister so well. *Heh... she thought. Irystiel's looking damned happy here, isn't she...?*

"Shall we buy something at the school store?" the plush cat asked. "It is such fun looking at all the things they have for sale."

"Well, why not, damn it?" Belianna said. The two made their way downstairs.

"If it isn't Irystiel!" said the man behind the counter. "Is this your big sister?"

This was Shion, an adult student at the Houghtow College of Magic. He had applied for a job at the school store, and overcame twenty-six rivals to secure this position.

"Hello, Mister Shion," the plush said. "Are you doing well today?"

"I am, thank you!" Shion said. He seemed to be completely at ease speaking to the plush cat. "We have new inventory in stock today. Go ahead and tell me if you want anything!"

Well, well... Belianna mused, breathing a sigh of relief. It looks like the people here are damned accepting of Irystiel's quirks... "Now," she said. "Let's see what they have. I could use something to eat..." She looked around the store until her eyes stopped on one item in particular—a set of blue wolf masks hanging from the wall of the shop. "Hm...?"

M-Maybe I'm imagining it... she thought. But that mask is a damned dead ringer for the one the Wolf of Justice wears...

"Oh, are you interested in that mask?" Shion had noticed her staring. He took a mask off the wall and handed it to Belianna. "It's a Wolf of Justice mask for playing pretend! Our main store, Fli-o'-Rys, started selling them just the other day. After all, he's the hero who forged peace between the Dark Army and the Magical Kingdom"

Belianna didn't hesitate. "I'll buy 'em."

"Hm? O-Oh, you want to buy this? You certainly may, but—"

"All of 'em."

"Wh-What?! All of them?! But...they're all identical!"

"Do I look like I care?" Belianna seized Shion by his shirt collar and shook him back and forth. "Bring them to me! Now!"

"O-O-Okay! I will! Just let me go so I can get the merchandise for you!"

Suddenly, Belianna seemed to remember herself. She let Shion go and awkwardly scratched the back of her head. "Damned sorry..." she said. "I guess I got a little too damned excited."

Shion smiled awkwardly back at her and retrieved a wooden box full of Wolf of Justice masks. Belianna didn't waste a moment before ripping it from his hands.

"These are mine!" she declared. "I want every single one in the

damned shop!”

“Y-You know...” Shion stuttered. “I could put in an order for you. They sell these things at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store. We could...”

“The Fli-o’-Rys General Store!” Belianna repeated. “Got it!” She paid Shion for the masks and took Irystiel by the arm. “Let’s hurry, Irystiel!” she said. “To the Fli-o’-Rys General Store! In the name of the Wolf of Justice!”

The pair left in an extraordinary hurry.

The Wolf of Justice had utterly defeated Belianna. At first, she had wanted revenge, but as she studied the Wolf of Justice’s philosophy and fighting style, that desire gave way to admiration. Those feelings had only gotten stronger since his victory over the rebel army. She had become one of his most ardent supporters.

Belianna and Irystiel ran out of the school store, leaving behind a bewildered Shion. “Th-Thank you for your business...” he said.

◇Osahka Town◇

Hero Gold-Hair’s party had arrived in the town of Osahka, here for the famous Osahka Town Eating Contest. They were at the event site, where five men stood on stage, ready for the battle of food.

“Go Dawkson!” Hero Gold-Hair cheered. “You’ve got this!”

“Pleeease try to get at least thiiird place!” Tsuya cried. “We’ll have to pay a looot of money if you—”

Riliangiu clapped a hand over Tsuya’s mouth. “Miss Tsuya,” she said. “The sponsors of this event forbid such talk, do they not?”

“Dawkson!” said Valentine. “I’m letting you go first, so you had better not lose!”

“As if!” Dawkson shouted back. “Nobody can stop me from getting first place! Gah ha ha ha ha!”

For all of Dawkson’s confidence, the competition was fierce. The other contestants were large-bodied demihumans. Next to them, Dawkson looked positively puny.

The contests were introduced, and the stage was set, the first dish placed before the contestants. “Cullry soup!” the rabbit woman who was serving as master of ceremonies said. “Made by Mister Cullry Calmeinn at his restaurant in Alkimba City!”

A great cheer rang out, surprising Hero Gold-Hair with its intensity. “This restaurant must be quite famous!” he said.

“No fair! I want to play...!” Valentine wailed, contorting her body in anguish.

“Now, let the contest begin!” At the rabbit woman’s signal, the five contestants began shoveling the cullry into their mouths as fast as they could.

“Wh-What’s wrong with Dawkson?” Hero Gold-Hair couldn’t

believe his eyes. Dawkson was just staring at the contents of his bowl, seemingly paralyzed. Great beads of sweat were dripping down his face. Something was clearly not right. The contestants around him were emptying bowl after bowl, while Dawkson wouldn't even take a bite.

"Hey, Dawkson!" Hero Gold-Hair shouted. "What are you doing?!"

Slowly, Dawkson turned his sweat-drenched head to look at Hero Gold-Hair. "Th-This..." he managed. "This soup has cyarrots in it..."

"What?!" Hero Gold-Hair and the others shouted in unison.

"C-Cyarrots," Dawkson stammered, "are the one thing I can't eat..."

Cyarrots. An orange root vegetable high in nutrition. An ingredient in many recipes. And Dawkson's one and only weakness.

"Don't be ridiculous!" Hero Gold-Hair shouted. "What are you, a child?! Choke it down if you have to! Just eat it!"

"I-I can't!" Dawkson said. "Even for you, Blondie. I just can't!"

"Wait!" said Valentine. "Let me take your place! I'll eat anything!"

"No can do!" the rabbit woman said. "There's no switching out once the contest has started, cutie!"

"Nnh..." Riliangu thought deeply before adding, "Then perhaps I can use my superhuman speed to remove only the cyarrots..."

"That won't work!" Dawkson cried, shaking his head as the rest of the team shouted their suggestions. "The soup already tastes like cyarrots! There's no way!"

The seconds dragged on...

"Then there's no choice..." said Hero Gold-Hair. "We'll have to use our last resort. Dawkson! Listen to me!"

"Wh-What is it, Blondie?!"

"Those orange bits in your bowl...those aren't cyarrots! Those are orange bell pebbers!"

"Really?!" Dawkson said. "But...they sure *look* like cyarrots..."

"They aren't! You must make yourself believe that they are not cyarrots!"

"Th-These aren't cyarrots..." Dawkson said.

"They are bell pebbers!" said Hero Gold-Hair.

"They're bell pebbers..."

"Not cyarrots!"

"These aren't cyarrots..."

"No! They are bell pebbers!"

"Bell pebbers..."

Dawkson seemed to fall into a trance. He took his spoon in hand. "The orange bits aren't cyarrots! They're bell pebbers! Okay! Here I come!" And then he froze again. "B-Blondie..." he said. "I can't eat bell pebbers either..."

“Wh-What?!” Hero Gold-Hair couldn’t believe his ears. Tsuya, Valentine, and Riliangiu absolutely lost it. And then the bell rang. The match was over.



“I was worried when Dawkson came in last place without finishing a single bowl!” Hero Gold-Hair said later that evening. “But then Valentine won five matches in a row! We’ve made a tidy profit, even after paying Dawkson’s penalty!”

“I knooow!” Tsuya beamed. “Thanks to Miss Vaaalentine, we have some moooney again!”

“Ehe hee!” Valentine giggled. “I could eat seven meals like that before breakfast! Or dinner, in this case.”

“D-Dinner?!” Riliangiu exclaimed. “Lady Valentine, you are still hungry after eating that much food?”

“Of course I am!” Valentine laughed. She had eaten enough food for a hundred humans, but apparently she had room for more. “That was but an appetizer!” she gloated. “And I might want a snack as well...”

Dawkson, meanwhile, looked absolutely dejected. “I’m sorry...” he said. “I can’t believe how much I suck...”

Hero Gold-Hair patted him on the back. “Don’t let it get to you!” he said. “Everyone has things they can’t eat! Well...everyone except for Valentine, I suppose!”

“That’s riight!” Tsuya said. “You knooow, when I’m feeling down, a biiig meal perks me riight up! We won loots of money in the contest. We should go somewhere niice!”

“For real? Hells yeah! Thanks, Tsuya!” Dawkson cheered, thrusting his arm skyward. He was back to his usual self.

Hero Gold-Hair smiled and nodded. “Now that that’s settled, let’s find somewhere to eat!”

“Yeah!” The party cheered, raising their arms as one. And on they walked, making their way to the entertainment district.

◇ A Forest near Houghtow City ◇

Flio and his companions were making their way through the forest surrounding their house. Blossom led the way, the farmworker goblins Maunty and Hokh’hokton by her side.

“I had no idea there was something like this in here,” Flio said.

“Me neither,” said Maunty, a grin on his face. “My children found it when they were playing in the forest. It isn’t very large, but it’s good fun. I’ve been going there a lot lately!”

Hokh’hokton, meanwhile, was walking a few strides behind. He

was muttering darkly to himself, casting furtive glances at the women. “*Gob gob... A lake, is it? I suppose it is the time of year for swimming... Perhaps I might have an opportunity to see Lady Blossom or Lady Rys in their swimsuits! Or perhaps Lady Wyne or Lady Elinàsze... Gob gob gob... Why, just imagine! It must be a beautiful sight...*”

“Hey, Klyrode to Hokh’hokton!” Blossom poked the goblin on the back of the head. “Everyone can see you leering, y’know! And...drooling...”

“Gh!” Hokh’hokton hastily wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “What have I been doing?!”

Blossom smirked knowingly. “You’d be a real catch if you weren’t such a weirdo about it, y’know? You’re a good guy and a hard worker.”

“So you say, Lady Blossom,” said Maunty. “But Hokh’hokton’s perversion is the only reason he works as hard as he does! He gets energy from the sight of your slightly exposed chest...your strong legs in a pair of shorts...”

“Sir Maunty, please!” said Hokh’hokton. “No more! Perhaps...I shall treat you to two mugs of fine ale, if you will leave it at that?”

“Five mugs,” said Maunty.

“Hmph. Deal.”

“Well then,” Maunty said. “Lady Blossom, would you please forget everything I just said?”

“Fine, fine,” said Blossom. “But from now on I’m showing up to work in long pants, overalls, and a long-sleeved turtleneck!”

“Curses!” lamented Hokh’hokton. “How will I enjoy myself at work, then?!”

I wish they wouldn’t talk about that kind of thing in front of the children... Flio thought, his smile strained as he walked behind them.



Sybe followed along behind Flio, walking on four legs in its psychobear form with Elinàsze sitting comfortably on its back. “The wind feels so nice!” she said, smiling cheerfully and holding a hand to her hair to keep it from fluttering. Garyl was walking alongside her and Wyne was flying overhead, her wyvern wings extending from her back.

“My lord husband, is it truly all right for us to take the day off from work?” asked Rys.

“Why not?” Flio gave her one of his easygoing smiles. “Minilio’s handling the interviews back at the shop, and we haven’t had to make any deliveries to the front lines in a while.”

Until recently, everyone at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store had been

terribly busy with orders from the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, delivering supplies to the knights on the front line, where they had been facing off against the Dark Army. Flio didn't want to send Greanyl—the shadow demon in charge of the shop's distribution network, who was a member of the Silent Listeners, the former intelligence apparatus of the Dark Army—on any life-threatening missions if he could help it. And so, he had taken on most of the deliveries to the front himself. But now that the Maiden Queen of the Magical Kingdom and Dark Regent Calsi'im of the Dark Army had signed a peace treaty and declared an end to the war, it had been safe for Greanyl's teams to make the deliveries on their own.

Rys understood what her husband meant. She smiled. "It's real, isn't it...?" she said. "We really are at peace..."

"Yes," said Flio, smiling back at his wife. "We are."

Blossom and the goblins led them through a gap in a cliff to reveal a wide-open space beyond it.

"Whoa!" Garyl cried. "Awesome!"

There was a lake stretching out before them, surrounded by trees and fed by a small waterfall flowing down from the top of the cliffs. "The lake is deep where the waterfall is," said Maunty. "You should jump in there and enjoy yourself! My children come to play here often!"

"Speaking of which, Maunty, how many children do you have again?" Blossom asked. "Wasn't it—"

"Twenty-one!"

"Twenty...one?" Rys's eyes shot open. She took hold of Flio's arm and stared up at his face. "*My lord husband,*" her face seemed to be saying. "*We mustn't lose to them!*"



Sybe waded its way into the water, Elinàsze on its back. "How marvelous!" she exclaimed. "It's like riding a wagon through the sea!" Sybe pressed on towards the middle of the lake, and before long it was swimming, paddling with its four legs. It submerged into the water just enough to get Elinàsze's legs wet. She kicked her feet in the water as she rode along. "Oh, this feels lovely!" she said. "Thank you so much, Sybe!" Sybe bobbed its head in response.

"Okay!" Garyl said, taking off his shirt. "I'm gonna swim!"

"Wait a moment, Garyl." Rys stopped him. "You don't have a swimsuit, do you?"

"What's the big deal, mom?" Garyl asked. "Who's gonna see us this deep in the mountains?" He took off his pants as well, and dove into the water.

"Garyl!" his mother exclaimed, smiling wryly despite herself at his

antics, and gathered up his discarded clothes. But then...

"Yeeaaaah! Me too! Me too!" Wyne threw her clothing aside and chased after Garyl, completely naked.

Hokh'hokton looked like he was devouring the scene with his eyes. "Ooooooh!" he cried. "A goddess has descended from the heavens! A naked goddess!!!" He tore off his own clothes and ran after them, over to where Wyne and Garyl had begun splashing each other with water. "Me toooooo! Let me join toooooo!"

Suddenly, Hokh'hokton found himself back at Blossom's farm. "H-Huh? Where did the naked goddess go?" He glanced around, hiding his groin from sight with his hands.



"Sorry about that," Flio said. The magic circle he had conjured revolved silently. "I sent Hokh'hokton back to the farm for now..."

Blossom nodded. "Serves him right!" she said. "I ought to thank you, really." This time it was her turn to begin stripping out of her clothes. "And now that *he's* gone, I figure I might go for a swim too!" Dressed in her undergarments, Blossom ran over to where Wyne and Garyl were splashing each other with increasing quantities of water. "Hey, can I join?"

"Oh! Hi, Blossom!" said Garyl. "Sure! Join right in!"

"Aha ha!" Wyne laughed. "I'm not holding back on you!"

"And *I'm* not gonna hold back on y—" Blossom began, before Garyl and Wyne both splashed her at once, knocking her off her feet and into the water. "Bleh! Teaming up's no fair!"

"Aha ha ha ha! Fun! Fun!" Wyne cheered.

Blossom, however, slowly circled around behind Wyne's back; just her head was sticking out of the water. "Gotcha! How'd you like *that?*!" she said, picking the dragonewt up from behind and spinning her around and around.

"Whaha?! Bloss-Bloss, this is great!" Heedless of her nudity, Wyne spread her limbs wide, giving everyone an eyeful of all kinds of parts. It didn't seem to bother her, though. She kept on laughing and laughing.

Flio and Maunty, meanwhile, had set up a campfire by the edge of the lake. The plan was to catch some fish and grill them up for lunch. There was an old fire pit here from when Maunty had come with his family, so it didn't take much work to get it roaring again.

Rys ran up to the two of them, smiling happily. "My lord husband!" she said. "Look!" She was holding an enormous fish in her arms, easily the length of her entire arm span.

"Wow! That's incredible!" Flio said. "Where did you catch it?"

"I went hunting over there, where the current is weaker," Rys

said. "The fish never knew what hit it!" She beamed cheerfully. With the giant fish in her arms, it was a peculiar sight indeed.

Time passed...

"Yahoo!" *Splash!*

"Waha!" *Splash!*

"Woo-hoo!" *Splash!*

Flio and Rys, who had been walking in the shallows, glanced over at Garyl, Wyne, and Blossom, who were entertaining themselves by diving from the top of the waterfall.

"This really does feel good," Flio said.

"The water must flow downstream from the forest to here..." Rys said. "It's still cool, even on a sunny day like this."

Just then, Sybe walked up to the two of them, Elinàsze still on its back. "Oh? What is it, Sybe?" Rys asked. Sybe lowered its head.

"It looks like it wants us to ride on its back as well!" Flio said.

Sybe nodded with a mighty "Gworf!" and Flio and Rys got up on its back. After making sure that its new passengers were safely aboard, Sybe headed back for the deep part of the lake.

"I've been playing with Sybe all day," said Elinàsze, who had settled into her father's arms. "It's so much fun!"

"It is!" Flio said with a smile. "The wind is nice, and Sybe's back is nice and comfortable."

That seemed to make Sybe happy. It began to swim faster.

"Now, Sybe," Rys said, snuggling up against Flio. "Let's take it slow for now. That way we can enjoy the view better." Sybe dutifully slowed back down.

Garyl, who noticed that Sybe now had three people on its back, swam up to the psychobear. "Let me on too!"

"Me too, me too!" said Wyne.

"All right, I'm in!" said Blossom. They began swimming for Sybe as well.

On the shore, Maunty was cooking up the giant fish Rys had caught while Flio's family enjoyed their peaceful day on the water.

◇That Night, Back at Flio's House...◇

"Ahhh..." Flio, freshly bathed, exhaled deeply as he stepped into his bedroom.

"Are you tired, my lord husband?" Rys looked up from her needlework and greeted him with a smile. "Was Wyne a handful tonight?"

"Quite a handful," Flio said. "All she wanted do was play with Garyl in the bath. They looked like they were having so much fun, I didn't want to stop them. But then they somehow got *me* involved

with it..." He smirked.

The baths in Flio's house were very much on the large side. Several of the residents were married, after all, and liked to take baths together. And as an unintended consequence, it gave the ever-rambunctious Wyne and Garyl lots of room to mess around.

"They were running around all day at the lake, but they still have so much energy..." Rys said.

"Tell me about it..." said Flio. "But as long as they're happy, so am I."

Rys drew close to her husband as she spoke. "I never could have imagined a life filled with so much happiness and joy," she said. "Not until I met you, my lord husband."

Flio smiled, as easygoing as ever. "By the way, Rys," he said, glancing over at her needlework. "What are you making?"

"Oh, this?" Rys giggled. "Why, clothing for the children!"

"The children? You mean Elinàsze and Garyl?"

"No, no. I mean our new children! Our next babies!"

"Huh?" Flio's eyes opened in surprise and drifted unconsciously towards Rys's belly.

"Hee hee... Not yet, alas," said Rys. "But perhaps...tonight?" She gently closed her eyes.

Flio took notice of his wife's signal and held her close, gently touching his lips to—

Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump! Someone was running down the hallway! They threw open the door to Flio and Rys's room with a huge clamor and jumped inside—it was Wyne!

Rys, who had sensed Wyne's arrival the moment she heard the first *thump* in the hallway, had already extricated herself from her husband's arms.

"Dada! Dada!" Wyne cried, wrapping her arms tight around Flio. "Let's play! Let's play!"

Flio gently pushed Wyne off himself. It looked like he was lightly holding her at bay, but Wyne was once a soldier of the dragon legion. The strength it took to peel her off was enough to shatter boulders. Fortunately, Flio had had the foresight to strengthen his body with magic.

"I played with you in the bath, didn't I?" he asked. "You still want more?"

"Yeah! I want more and more! I wanna play and play with dada and mama and everyone!" She hugged him again, purring happily like a cat.

And then... "Oh! There you are, Wyne!"

"Wyne! You mustn't keep papa all to yourself!"

Garyl and Elinàsze burst into the room after Wyne and joined

their big sister in hugging Flio.

“Goodness!” Rys laughed, hugging Flio as well. “You are very popular, aren’t you, my lord husband?”

“I love my dada and I love my mama!” said Wyne.

“Me too, mom!” said Garyl.

“And myself as well, of course!” added Elinàsze.

Flio found himself squeezed between his wife and children, doing his best to hug all of them.

The children slept in their parents’ room that night. Flio was the last to fall asleep. He lay in bed, gazing fondly at his family, blissfully happy.

Afterword

Thank you so much as always for reading this book! It's been a privilege to see *Level 2 Cheat* make it all the way to a fifth volume! To be perfectly honest, I never imagined we would make it this far! I owe it all to your support. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

As it happens, just this month I have a new series on sale under the name Miya Kinojo, published through Tsugikuru Books: *Isekai Sakaba no Ossan to Bijo (The Middle-Aged Man and the Beautiful Woman of the Otherworld Tavern)*. I've been pouring my heart into it. I hope you will enjoy it as well.

Some of the stories in this book—Yuigarde's desertion, the children's first day at school, and the Dark Regent—were drawn from popular episodes of the web novel, but everything had to be rewritten for this version. There are going to be even more new characters and jokes going forward in this wacky series! Let's hope we're in it for the long haul!

Finally, I'd like to thank Katagiri-sama for the wonderful illustrations, and the people at Overlap for everything related to publication. And, of course, everyone who's read my book! I owe it all to you.

Miya Kinojo, May 2018



Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri



At the lake



Name Valentine 8

Name Dawkson 8

Name Tsuya 8

“They just eat waaay too much...”

Name Hero Gold-Hair 8

In a tavern

Bonus Short Stories

Blossom's Morning Market

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

One night, Blossom came to Flio as he was relaxing in the living room with a proposition.

"You want to sell vegetables this morning?"

"Yes, sir," said Blossom. "I was wondering if I might have permission to sell some of the vegetables we grow on the farm I run in front of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store. Like a morning market!"

"Even though selling wholesale produce in the city market is against the rules?"

"Yes," Blossom said, "well, I've always thought it was a shame that we can't get our veggies to our customers right when they're first picked in the morning! It'd be nice to sell them while they're still fresh..."

Blossom ran a farm which sprawled out in front of Flio's house. With the help of her goblin assistants Maunty and Hokh'hokton, she had managed to expand it to a considerable degree. After all, she had come from a farming family, and had learned how to help in the fields from a young age.

Flio gave Blossom's suggestion a bit of thought. "I see..." he said. "Well, why don't I head down to the merchant's guild tomorrow and ask them for permission to sell vegetables directly at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store? They'll probably be fine with it so long as we ask first."

"Yeah! Thanks, Lord Flio!" Overjoyed, Blossom leapt up to hug Flio tight, pressing her voluptuous tanned chest against Flio's arm. Between Rys, Uliminas, Balirossa, and Damalynas, Flio's house was full of large-breasted women, but Blossom could compete with the biggest of them. A bit of blush crept into Flio's cheeks at the sensation.

"Kay then!" Blossom declared. "I'll go get things ready, so we can go as soon as you get permission! Good luck with the merchant's guild!" And so she ran off towards the fields, seemingly unconcerned with the fact that it was now after dark. Sybe snuffled and transformed back from its unicorn rabbit form to its original psychobear body. It ran after Blossom, eager to get to work.

She wasn't in any danger from magic beast attacks. Flio's house was protected by a magic barrier after nightfall. But Sybe nonetheless

felt the need to accompany her for protection.

Flio smirked as the pair ran into the distance. "And they're off..."

Just then, he felt the sensation of a woman's chest once again pressing against his arm.

"My lord husband..." Rys said. "You weren't...*enjoying* Blossom's breasts touching you like that, were you?"

Flio looked at Rys, who was clinging on to his arm. Her mouth was pursed in a thin line, like she was jealous. "Not nearly as much as I enjoy yours, Rys," he said, smiling.

Rys looked him over. "Prove it," she said. "With actions, not words." And so she dragged him upstairs to their bedroom.

The two made love for even longer than usual that night.

◇Two Days Later—The Fli-o'-Rys General Store◇

That morning, there was a tent set up in front of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, decorated with banners bearing words such as "Straight from Blossom Acres" and "Fresh from the Fields!" The day before, Flio had gotten permission from the merchant's guild, and Blossom had rushed to set it up first thing in the morning.

It was so early, in fact, that the general store itself was not yet open. The doors were locked up tight, and there was a placard hanging over the door reading: "CLOSED." And yet a great number of people were already in the wagon-staging area behind the shop. Greanyl, the shadow demon in charge of the company's wholesaling, was assigning them jobs, sending their wagons all over the land. But there was also a number of merchants from other companies, near and far alike, hoping to stock Fli-o'-Rys wares in their own stores.

Several of the people working there caught sight of the tent set up in front of the shop. They began to gather around curiously.

"What's going on here?"

"This looks interesting..."

Blossom, a great big grin on her face, stepped out in front of the crowd and addressed them in a loud voice. "Come one, come all! We've got freshly harvested veggies on sale! Open for business!"

"Vegetables, huh...?" someone said.

"They *do* look fresh," another added. "I wish you had some prepared meals for sale though..."

"But the freshness is undeniable," said a third. "My mouth is watering just looking at them..."

"Now wait just a minute," Blossom said, procuring a pile of lunch boxes and piling them up on the stall table. "I got these meals ready just for all of you working your butts off in the early morning!"

Blossom had asked Rys to make her those lunch boxes. Each one contained veggies from Blossom's farm, stir-fried with meat.

“Whoa!” a customer said. “That looks delicious!”

“Yeah! I’ll take one for sure!”

“Me too!”

People were piping all over, clamoring for the lunch boxes.

Blossom smiled happily. “Course!” she said as she handed them over.

“Thanks for your business!”

Box after box of the food disappeared into the customers’ mouths.

“This *is* good!”

“The meat’s good, but the vegetables are *really* good!”

People seemed to like them. And then, the local housewives began to notice the crowd.

“I wonder what’s going on over there...”

“Is something happening?”

They drew closer, curious. And then they saw the banners decorating the tent, along with the mountains and mountains of fresh vegetables inside. They began to rush, their eyes aflame.

“Oh? Miss Blossom is selling her vegetables!”

“Fresh from the farm too!”

“I simply *must* buy some!”

Blossom sold her vegetables inside the store itself, but with the range of merchandise stocked by Fli-o’-Rys, there was only so much she could sell. Word of the flavor and quality of her produce had gotten out to the housewives of the area, and many of them would line up early every day, aiming to snag some vegetables. But these were straight from the farm—and moreover, they were being sold in bulk!

Between the customers buying lunch boxes and the wave of housewives they had attracted, Blossom had enough customers to risk trampling the tent entirely.

“Holy crap!” Blossom cried, not sure if she was excited or terrified. “This is incredible!”

From then on, Blossom’s Morning Market became a Fli-o’-Rys staple.

Flio and the Holy Treasures of the Celestial Plane

◇Houghtow City—Fli-o’-Rys General Store◇

Just outside of downtown Houghtow, the Fli-o’-Rys General Store was always busy with customers from the moment they opened their doors. More people had been coming each and every day. Even other stores had started signing contracts with Fli-o’-Rys to carry their merchandise. Most of their contracts, though, were secret agreements with Klyrode Castle to supply provisions to the front lines.

“Welcome!” Flio said, looking up from stocking the shelves as a customer entered the shop.

Ghozal was standing next to the door, serving as both bouncer and watchman. His appearance would likely frighten people if he was the first thing they saw entering the store, though, so he usually kept his presence concealed with magic when he worked. The customer didn’t pay him any notice at all as she walked up to Flio.

“Excuse me...” she said. “Are you an employee of this store?”

“Yes,” said Flio. “I am.”

“Um...” the girl hesitated. “May I perhaps speak with Mister Flio, the proprietor?”

“Oh, of course! If you’re looking for Flio, you found him.”

The girl smiled. “Oh!” she said. “How lucky that you were in the shop! My name is Shino. Sireul, an adventurer of my acquaintance, told me that you might be able to repair my broken sword...” She took her sword out from its sheath and handed it to Flio.

Flio looked it over, evidently impressed. “This is quite a blade!” he said. “I can see that it’s been forged out of thin layers of steel folded into each other again and again. And it’s been enchanted so you can infuse the blade with fire, water, or wind elemental magic, depending on your enemy’s weaknesses... It looks like the magic gem has been damaged.”

“Y-Yes,” Shino said. Her eyes opened wide. “That’s exactly right.” She paused. “Um... May I ask how you were able to tell all that just from holding the blade?”

Shino had brought this sword to countless general stores and weapon shops looking for someone who could repair it, but its workings had been far beyond all of them. Then her acquaintance Sireul told her about Mister Flio of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store. He promised her with utmost confidence that Flio would be able to fix it. But she had been harboring doubts about whether he really could.

“I’m pretty decent at magic,” Flio said, giving Shino one of his easygoing smiles. “If I do say so myself.”

Shino caught herself bending forward to get a closer look. *P-Perhaps this man could truly repair my grandfather’s holy sword!*

“Then...” she ventured. “Would you by chance be able to repair it? This sword is truly precious to me.”

“I can tell,” Flio said. “It’s easy to see that you’ve treated it with great care. All right, here you go.” And he handed Shino back her sword.

“Um...” she said. “Are you...going to repair it?”

“I just did!” Flio responded. “Go ahead and check!”

“What?” Shino said. And then she jumped. “Wh-What?!” The magic gem set in the sword, which had been badly cracked, looked

whole and pristine, as if it had never been damaged at all. “I don’t believe it!” Shino ran a finger over the gem, a look of bewilderment on her face. “That was no more than a second!”

Actually, it had been ten seconds from the time she handed the sword to Flio. In that time, Flio had simply touched his hand to the magic gem and repaired it with a spell of his own. Ordinarily, to repair a sword like this, you would need to replace the magic gem with one of equal power. It should have been impossible to simply repair the gem like that.

Half in disbelief, Shino channeled power into the sword. “Fire...” she said. “Water.” On command, the sword blazed with flames, and then was enveloped with water. “You really did it... It’s completely fixed...” Shino looked back up at Flio. “Thank you! From the bottom of my heart! I would never have imagined that it could be repaired so quickly!” She bowed deep, again and again.

“No need for that!” Flio told her, smiling. “In fact, thank *you* for the opportunity to work with such a remarkable sword!”

“If I may... How much do I owe you...?” Shino asked timidly.

Because her sword was broken, Shino hadn’t been able to hunt magic beasts very much of late. Not only that, she had spent quite a bit of money traveling around looking for someone who could repair it. She was running a little short on cash. Of course, she had every intention of paying. She would go immediately to hunt magic beasts to earn the money, if she had to.

“I have a proposition, actually,” Flio said. “If you take me up on it, I’ll be happy to waive the cost of repairing your sword.

“What?” Again, Shino’s eyes opened in surprise. “It’s supposed to be almost impossible to repair a magic gem...but you’d do it for free? What in the world is this proposition of yours?”

“Well, you see,” Flio began...

◇Days Later—The Fli-o’-Rys General Store◇

The next day, there was a row of newly made swords in a display case with the other weapons. There was a label on the case. It read, “Magic Swords: Swords enchanted with fire, water, or wind magic. Usable with no magic ability. Magic gem-charging service available.”

“Oh?” Uliminas said when she looked it over. “These are meowdeled after the sword from the other day?”

Flio smiled, as carefree as ever. “I got permission from Miss Shino to use it as a template and duplicated it a few times with magic. Although I only gave them half the magic power of the original.”

“So mew reduced the power...” Uliminas said. “But they still look purretty strong...” She took one of the swords, smirking.

“Yes,” Flio answered. “That’s half the power of the original. And

any given sword will only have one of the three elemental enchantments.” As he spoke, he took another sword out of his Bottomless Bag. “Now *this* sword, on the other hand, I made for my own research.”

“Meow?!” Uliminas was stunned. “Th-Th-Th-That meowgic gem! It has *seven* elemental enchantmewnts! And it’s *easily* a hundred times meowre powerful than this one! And it enhances the wielder’s speed...and purrception...and the blade’s cutting ability! How many enchantmewnts does this thing *have*?!”

“I made it for research, like I said,” Flio responded, still smiling his easygoing smile. “I just tried every enchantment I could think of.”

Every enchantmewnt he could think of... Uliminas marveled. *This sword could pass as a treasure of the Celestial Plane! And he made this for research! That Flio really is something else...*

The Four Wives’ Tea Party

It was early in the afternoon and Rys, Uliminas, Balirossa, and Byleri had gathered together in the living room. Quite by chance, they had found themselves all married and cohabitating—and sometimes, when they were all free, Rys would invite the other three to have a tea party together.



Uliminas grinned slyly as she took a sip of her tea. Perhaps it was the cat in her, but even though her tea had already been cooled down, she still needed to blow on it time and time again before she dared drink. “But fur real,” she said. “Who would have ever expected Rys to be the first one with kittens!”

Rys smiled back amiably. “Whatever do you mean?” she said. “I was the first to be married, after all. Doesn’t it stand to reason?”

“I suppose so...” Uliminas said. “They called mew a man-eater back in the day, mew know! I just can’t believe how well your meowrriage has gone.”

“Well,” Rys said. “After all, my husband is...quite extraordinary. Hee hee hee hee hee...” Suddenly embarrassed, she hid her rapidly reddening face behind her hands.

“Perhaps...” Balirossa said, smiling rather cheerfully herself as she drank her tea. “But if the two of us continue to be so intimate with our husband, Ser Uliminas, it may only be a matter of time before we are blessed as well...” At this, Byleri timidly raised a shaking hand. “Hm?” Balirossa asked. “Is there something you need, Byleri?”

“Like, um, not exactly...” Byleri said. “But I’m

just...y'know...curious? Balirossa...you and Miss Uliminas are, like, both totally married to Mister Ghozal now, right?"

"Yes. What of it?"

"Demon law purrrmits men to have as many as three wives," Uliminas recited. "We're allowed."

"No, no, like, I totally don't have a problem with that..." Byleri trailed off. "But, like... y'know. At night? How does it...y'know, like, go down?"

"At night...you say?" Balirossa asked.

"I mean..." Byleri persevered. "Like, do you do it together? Or, like, take turns? I just, like, y'know. I was wondering." She stared at the two with a look of great interest.

Both Uliminas and Balirossa spat out a mouthful of tea in perfect unison.

"Pfff!"

"Pfffreow!!!"

"Sh-Should we answer the question, do you suppose?" Balirossa wondered out loud.

"L-Look!" Uliminas said. "Sleip doesn't seem like he's looking for another wife or anything. It's not really something you need to worry about..." Both she and Balirossa's cheeks were turning quite red, their voices stilted and unnatural.

"Hee hee!" Byleri giggled. "Like, you're totally right, I guess... I'm just, like, curious about that kind of stuff, y'know? Like, if he does you both at the same time, what do you do when he's, y'know, with the other one...?"

"What do we do when—" Balirossa repeated. "Well, sometimes, he turns his arms into tentacles in order to..." It seemed, despite all logic, that she was going to answer the question.

"B-Balirossa!" Uliminas interrupted. "Not one meowr word!"

"A-Ah!" Balirossa suddenly seemed to return to her senses. She shook her head. "I-I-I didn't say anything! I didn't say *anything*! Right, Byleri?!"

"I don't remember mew saying anything," Uliminas agreed.

"Hmm..." Byleri said, hanging her head in disappointment. "Well, like, if you say so..."

"What about you, Byleri?" Rys asked. "Sleip is the oldest member of our household. Does he have any difficulty performing?"

"Hee hee hee..." Byleri giggled again. "Well, actually..." A grin crossed over her face as she glanced around the room. "Lord Sleip has, like, tons of energy! We totally do it like every night! Like... At first, there were some issues with...y'know...his size? And I had never, like, y'know. Before. But I've gotten way better at taking it lately! And..."

Byleri had turned red all the way up to her ears, but she went on

and on, chattering eagerly about her nighttime activities, a goofy grin on her face the whole time. She kept remembering particulars as she spoke. Her breath would become hot and flustered and she'd say something like, "Ahhh... My Lord Sleip was, like, totally amazing that time..."

"B-Byleri..." Rys said. "You don't have to..."

"Y-Yeah!" agreed Uliminas. "Mew don't gotta push meowrself..."

"I-I must agree," said Balirossa. "What would Sir Sleip say if he..."

But all their efforts were in vain. "No, no!" Byleri said. "Like, it's fine! I, like, *want* everyone to know how totally happy we are!" She grinned deliriously as she returned to the subject of her sex life, completely unashamed.

Byleri's account showed no signs of coming to a close anytime soon. Rys, Uliminas, and Balirossa brought their heads together in a huddle.

"B-Balirossa..." Rys whispered. "Was Byleri like this when she was a knight?"

"N-No..." Balirossa whispered back. "In fact, she used to run away the second anyone so much as broached the topic..."

"Hard to imeowgine now..." whispered Uliminas.

"And then *after* that," Byleri continued, seeming not to notice their whispered conversation, "Lord Sleip like *totally* went and..."

And on and on and on she went.

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by Miya Kinojo

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